

The only ability I got in a different world "Returns by Death"
I die again and again to save her.

長月達平

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Chapter 80: Rough Tongue

—Wakefulness comes with the touch of something rough stroking his cheek.

What Subaru feels as his consciousness bobs to the surface is an encompassing sense of lethargy. His body is so sluggish he could suspect that his veins and arteries no longer run with blood, but lead.

Subaru opens his mouth to inhale, when his dry and sticking lips tear with a sharp pain and the taste of blood seeping into his oral cavity. Inside an utterly arid mouth, Subaru's tongue skulks about as it seeks the liquid so known as blood.

The movements of his limbs are slow, his head feverish and working poorly.

He lacks even the strength to force open his eyelids, instead managing to get his eyes open by rolling his heavy eyeballs.

Subaru: "...You."

The moment colour enters his vision, Subaru sees as ebony of a different hue than the undersides of his eyelids.

That moving thing exhales breaths scented with the smell characteristic to beasts, and had been consolingly licking the sleeping Subaru.

A lustrous black body, with a slender, refined form. Although sharp, its reptilian eyes have a kind of charm, and its knifelike fangs could send one to eternal rest with merely a single bite. From the mouth hosting these fangs there extends the red tongue which had licked Subaru's cheek—which belongs to Subaru's beloved steed, Patrasche.

Patrasche notices that the awakened Subaru has recognized her presence and sits down, stopping with her licking as she waits for his words. This surprisingly dexterous dragon apparently can fold her legs to seat herself.

Seeing Patrasche before him, and having something hard at his back supporting him, Subaru realises that his posture is one with his legs splayed out straight over the ground. He tilts his head back, to find that this object behind him is an overgrown, mossy stone wall, and that probably he has just woken up in the vicinity of the tomb's entryway.

Subaru: "But I was inside... why'm, outside?"

The established precedent is that he wakes up from the dream castle to find himself inside the tomb. If someone went in and pulled the unconscious Subaru outside then that's another story, but right now the only two people who can enter the tomb in SANCTUARY are Emilia and Garfiel.

The concept that either one of them had dragged Subaru out lacks any real feeling of credibility. Subaru: "That said, really doubt I crawled out myself, so who the..."

heck, is the word he goes to continue with, when the echo of a new voice interrupts him.

The cry comes from a silhouette running over from beyond Patrasche, trundling as it approaches, out of breath.

?: "Hey! P-Patrasche-chan, hold... wait! Ahh, hwaah... I-if you perhaps run away, it'd would be a disaster for m... huh?"

The grey-haired young man, Otto, comes to a stop with an expression of utmost relief as he sights Patrasche. He gives a relieved sigh at Patrasche, then tilting his head as he notices Subaru beside.

Otto: "Well hello Natsuki-san. What is it you're doing out here?"

Subaru: "Can't you see, I'm moonbathing. More like what're you doing out here this late? Depending how you answer, I'm shunting you over to Garfiel."

Otto: "I don't know why you're presupposing that I've committed something improper, but my being out here at this hour with my brow dripping in sweat isn't unrelated to you, Natsuki-san."

Subaru jokes around in usual form to gloss matters over. Otto shrugs, shaking his head. Subaru: "Not unrelated to me?"

Otto: "There seemed quite a ruckus, and so I go to the dragon stables to see what's happening, where I find Patrasche-chan kicking up a great fuss. I wonder whether being kept pent in for several days may have built up stress in her, and unlatch the gates thinking to take her out for a little stroll, and... POW."

Giving a great clap of his hands, Otto glares at the dignified Patrasche. Patrasche completely ignores him as she continues staring at Subaru.

Otto: "She's disregarding me entirely, well though I mean that's fine. So, she thrusts me aside as she bursts out of the stables. I was disoriented for some little while, but then I truly panicked as I realised that if she escaped outside it would be catastrophic considering my standing, and now here is where we are."

Subaru: "And since she came to me, you're relaxed on that front."

Otto: "Yes, that's correct. Natsuki-san, did you leave Patrasche-chan with some kind of instructions?"

Subaru: "No leisure time for that. I didn't even hang out with her 'cept to give her her food..."

Otto: "If you hadn't then you may have worried her. Considering how she left in such an incredible hurry."

Subaru: "—"

Worry, is the word in Otto's mutter which plugs Subaru's throat and prevents him from voicing the rebuttal on his tongue.

No way, is the thought which boils up as Subaru looks over his own body's condition in search of the evidence. He immediately finds the aftermath.

At the right shoulder of his jacket, he discovers the faint depressions of teeth-marks and traces of saliva. Subaru's back, too, is massively dirty with dust, as if he had been dragged.

Subaru: "Patrasche..."

Patrasche: "—"

Her round irises direct themselves toward Subaru.

Subaru unwittingly swallows his breath at the dragon, who waits in silence for her master's words. Subaru: "Did you drag me out of the tomb?"

Of course there is no way Patrasche can answer back with words. But after recognizing the dirtiness of his own body and looking at the dragon, Subaru notices that her black skin is flecked with lacerations.

You can prepare tools to damage the hard, scaled hide of a ground dragon, but it would still be a difficult task to achieve. To Subaru it seemed that those wounds had spawned from inside her.

—The tomb has powers to repel creatures who are unqualified to take the TRIAL.

Roswaal's wounds as he chillaxes in the recuperation hut had originated from this. Should something unqualified tread inside, the tomb would bear its fangs at the snoop. Meaning,

Subaru: "Did, you seriously get yourself injured to pull me out?" Patrasche: "—"

Subaru: "Why'd you, something so stupid... for me it's, I just wake up and walk outside like

whatever and then... well that's all. You didn't have to get so flustered about pulling me out that you got wounded..."

The slices cut into Patrasche's hide are sharp enough that the red flesh beneath her black scales shows through, and painful-looking enough that just seeing the blood oozing through makes Subaru want to grimace.

Patrasche had brought Subaru outside to the point that she sustained these wounds—and plainly said, the deed was pointless.

Failing to understand the motives behind Patrasche's actions, Subaru casts his gaze down as the dragon brings her snout near. Subaru remains with his legs still sloppily splayed out as a hard, rough texture nuzzles and nuzzles against the back of his neck.

The wordless mutual understanding Subaru believed they had occasionally achieved was in fact a one-way road, and this relationship was entirely one of him being cared for in multiple contexts.

Subaru: "Otto."

Otto: "Ah, what is it? You two look to be having a nice moment so I was thinking to leave so as not to intrude, but..."

Subaru: "Can you, please ask Patrasche why she helped me?"

Otto has his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY, which means he should be able to converse with animals, insects, and such other various lifeforms.

What was Patrasche thinking as she tried so hard to bring Subaru out that she got wounded? The question behind the roots of her actions inevitably gives Subaru unease.

But Otto frowns at Subaru's request, his expression reluctant.

Otto: "Honestly speaking, I'm not especially inclined, Natsuki-san." Subaru: "Don't say that, just please."

Otto: "Going from what I can conject from your mutterings to Patrasche-chan,

Natsuki-san, you had just been inside the tomb with its TRIAL? I had vaguely suspected from this noon that you're qualified to take the TRIAL, but judging from the state you're in I'd suspect that you failed?"

Subaru: "...Yeah, you got it."

The impact from his conversation with the witches had been too intense and his memory for this had near faded, but in this loop Subaru had neglected to inform everyone that he had beaten the first TRIAL. He had revealed the fact to Garfiel alone as an exception, from there entered the tomb and underwent the second TRIAL, and then came the witches' tea party.

The TRIAL was not the entire reason for his being overwhelmed, but Subaru finds no reason to correct Otto's misunderstanding and instead proceeds to simply nod.

Otto's shoulders slump as he gives an astonished sigh.

Otto: "I can imagine several reason why you did that, but... what you did was stupid, Natsuki-san. Your time inside was severe, and as the finisher you worried your dragon, leading to this present situation. Since Patrasche-chan possesses great intuition, she must have noticed that something had happened to you. And so she blasted me out of the way and dashed to here... I'm sure her wounds aren't unrelated, either."

Subaru: "—"

Otto follows down the same path that Subaru's imaginings had to reach this conclusion.

Subaru's figured out this much. The problem at hand is why did Patrasche go

so far for him. Which is what he'd like to get Otto to ask her.

Otto: "What is that, that look. You mean, you were actually serious about what you were saying before?"

Subaru: "How about we flip this, you seriously think I look like I'm in a state to be joking?" Otto: "My feeling is that you have the pluck to tell terrible jokes even when you're worn ragged,

Natsuki-san, and in this situation I would be more driven to mirth were I told it was in jest. —You truly don't understand?"

Before Subaru can counter Otto's low-voiced question, he finds himself overwhelmed beneath Otto's gaze.

Otto is looking down at Subaru in disbelief, or more bluntly said Otto is looking at Subaru as if he were an idiot. So, Subaru had made some preposterous oversight somewhere here, or something?

But Subaru hits on no ideas as he fidgets, coming up with only confusion as he furrows his brows. Sweat rises on his forehead from his being flustered, but not a single idea rises in his thoughts.

Otto gives his second sigh.

Otto: "My blessing isn't as faultless as you believe it is, Natsuki-san. While mutual communication is possible, that does not mean that it does translations. What they're saying does convey to me clearly, but if I'm to act as an intermediary to convey it to someone else, there's a tricky problem of nuance."

Subaru: "—"

Otto: "That look is saying 'whatever do it anyway'. Well I'll do it, but... I really

wonder if there's any point, in this."

Mutters Otto in dissatisfaction as he nevertheless heeds Subaru's request.

Otto approaches Patrasche who remains with her snout nuzzling Subaru, Otto gently stroking her black back.

Otto: <—>

The sound that launches out of Otto's open mouth is a noise rasping and shrill.

This cry, inconceivable of being any human speech, was the consequence of his BLESSING OF XENOGLOSSY operating to convert his voice into a more appropriate form for communication with ground dragons.

Patrasche raises her head and answers Otto in an identical type of keen. Hearing this, Otto opens his mouth again and so goes the conversation of dinosaur noises.

Otto: "That would be the end, but... hrm, it really is difficult to find the proper wording to communicate this. Her manner of emotional expression differs from a human's too, so how am I best to explain information only I can understand..."

Subaru: "Stop teasing. I'm begging, please tell me."

Otto: "It isn't that I'm trying to tease, but.... augh, this really is problematic! Or actually, communicating this honestly requires an incredibly weird fastidiousness."

Scratching his head, Otto looks up countless times as he deliberates, otherwise hanging his head as he mulls it over, and about at the time where Subaru starts to get restless and fidgety, Otto sighs.

Otto: "Right, here it is. I've chosen the words that, probably, are the closest I can figure."

Subaru: "Right... and Patrasche was?"

Otto: "Ermm, SURELY YOU WOULDN'T MAKE ME SAY IT, is about what I have." Subaru: "—wha?"

Otto scratches at his cheek embarrassedly as he speaks. Subaru's eyes widen.

He proceeds to wait to see if Otto will say anything else, but it doesn't seem any more words are coming. Seeing the stunned Subaru,

Otto: "Patrasche-chan said SURELY YOU WOULDN'T MAKE ME SAY IT. My opinion on it would be 'well yeah sounds about right'."

Subaru: "DON'T MAKE ME SAY IT... what's that..."

Otto: "Call it what or how, I'd say it means what it means. If I'm to supplement with my personal opinion, it would be: you truly need to be told before you can understand this?"

Seeing Subaru's confusion intensify, Otto raises his finger. Otto: "Listening?"

Otto: "Regardless your awareness of whether they're in a predicament, when you cannot bear to sit still and go soaring out, paying no reluctance to the fact you may be wounded as you offer your help, then stay constantly by their side

until their awakening, and once they do wake you give them a relieved, relaxed smile—my thoughts are that someone who does such a thing would be thinking identically whether they're a dragon or human.”

Subaru: “Auh—”

Otto: “Which means that you wouldn't have to be Patrasche-chan for this to be a DON'T MAKE ME SAY IT. Not noticing it when her attitude expresses it so notably is incredibly daft. You're truly in bliss.”

Hearing Otto's rather astonished question, Subaru recognizes the degree of his own stupidity. Subaru looks at the yet-near Patrasche, to find her staring at Subaru with her consistently calm gaze. Perhaps noticing the change in Subaru's mental state, she rocks her long tail as she stands up.

Patrasche: “—”

Patrasche again draws her snout near. Subaru's hand naturally moves to pat it. As his palm strokes her hard, craggy hide, Subaru's voice shakes.

Subaru: “Ri, ght.. you, like me.” Patrasche: “—”

Subaru: “You love me, and that's why you're, here for me.”

Something jammed in his heart drops with a thunk.

Patrasche growls in reply, violently rasping her snout against Subaru's palm in an attempt to conceal her embarrassment. Scrunching his brows at the feeling of his scraped skin, Subaru goes to open his mouth—

Subaru: "Oeu, awuh..." Otto: "Natsuki-san?"

A droplet of heat falls to Subaru's cheek.

A teardrop. At some point the stuff which abruptly welled up had overflowed. He hurriedly puts his hand to his cheek to wipe it away, but it's too late to hide. Otto saw it.

Otto: "Crying because you recognized your dragon is attached to you, Natsuki-san this..." Subaru: "Nnuh, I... that's not, what this is... just, the timing lined up too godadmn well, and... fucking, just when it didn't really feel that real, suddenly the answer just comes fucking flying in my mental preparations weren't..."

The nigh-unfair timeliness of this development leads more of the stuff to well up, which Subaru frantically restrains.

Back at the tea party, Subaru had awakened to his true feelings of not wanting to die. As well as to his greed of, on the same par that he desired to protect those precious to him, he desired to exist alongside those precious ones.

Did he have the merit in him for his precious ones to value him? This particular thought was more difficult to acknowledge, and so Subaru had just pledged to verify whether it was true.

And now, Patrasche's uncompensated loyalty.

Having his stunt pulled on him before he could do anything. What the heck is he meant to do?

The answer to what Subaru had agonized over, wondering what he should do, Patrasche had ferried in alongside his awakening.

For Patrasche at the very least, Subaru was a presence which conferred great enough influence that she, if having realised that he was having a nightmare, would desire to drag him outside even if it meant herself being wounded.

Subaru: "Didn't think I'd be getting the lesson from you. —Thank you, Patrasche." Answering to the loyalty directed at him, Subaru too fills his strokes with emotion as he pats Patrasche. Patrasche resolutely stretches out her neck as she stands still, savouring the sensation of his palm. That said, the swaying of her tail casually expresses her good spirits.

Otto: "Now that you've again recognized your bond with Patrasche-chan, Natsuki-san are you all right?"

Subaru: "Yeah, that helped a ton, thank you. ...am I alright?"

Otto: "I mean as in physically or mentally. The TRIAL must've been quite the tuckerer, yes? You're at the point where you're crying from lonesomeness, and Emilia-sama had been in an identical state."

While Subaru would like to refute Otto's bantering, that he's grasped his weakness is unmistakable and so he refrains from alluding to it. Subaru instead considers Emilia's condition.

Subaru: "Easy, is what it isn't. But I think it's better for me to do it than Emilia. But nevermind all that, so even you're worried about me... could it be that you love me too?"

Otto: "Could you please keep from saying anything repulsive!? What is this, lonesomeness surely must have some line to leave uncrossed. Patrasche alone

wasn't enough to satisfy you, and now you're in the mood to ask that question of everyone you meet?"

Subaru: "Can't I? Honestly right now I'm on the periphery of being able or not able to give myself validation, so I'd like to get even one more encouraging missive."

Otto: "Right right, excellent that your usual gab is back. ...My worries for you were entirely resultant from my forethought to our ongoing relations. I would ask that you please don't misunderstand."

His expression displeased as he hears Subaru's forecastual announcing of his incoming eccentricity, Otto holds his arms out at Subaru as he makes his assertion.

Forethought to our relations, was some incredibly showy talk, but for an Otto who wished to clearly maintain the standing of a merchant it was probably a necessary statement.

Otto: "My acquaintance with you, Natsuki-san, is because I would like to preserve cordial relations with Margrave Mathers. Should some problem arise on that front, and more essentially should it appear that I myself will be faced with peril, I will be taking a zippy and ramshackle escape. I would appreciate for you to remember that."

Call it unfeeling and it's a pretty unfeeling statement, but what Otto's talking about should less be called severe and more be called a tacit agreement. That Otto goes out of the way to voice it is a demonstration of Otto's being a good person, late as it is to mention that.

Subaru: "Right, yeah. You... or, no."

Accepting Otto's realist remark, Subaru moves to nod—and stops.

An awriness skims through Subaru's mind. He reaches the solution instantly, giving a breathy sigh. Otto: "...What is it?"

Subaru: "Just remembered. Yeah, remembered. Remembered."

Nodding several times to a sceptical Otto, Subaru puts his hand to his head as he looks to the sky. Subaru and Otto had operated together multiple times during these loops in SANCTUARY. And every time, Subaru saw it.

And so,

Subaru: "You get in danger, and you're zipping off ramshackle... huh."

Otto: "Yes, indeed. That I'd do so is natural. There's no reason for me to extend such service for you, Natsuki-san, or whoever else. As they say, always life for a living man..."

Subaru: "You wouldn't run." Otto: "—Weh?"

Otto attempts in frivolous tone to take a realist's air, when Subaru mutters. Otto's eyes widen. Subaru looks him straight-on.

Subaru: "—You wouldn't leave me and run, Otto."

Otto had snuck into the hidden building of a violence-ready Garfiel, to rescue Subaru. Otto had fought alongside the villagers, halting transformed Garfiel, to protect Subaru.

Though he speaks lines and lines of heartless words, acting like a bad person, Subaru knows that he isn't.

Subaru: "Because, Otto. —You're my friend."

Chapter 81: Glimmer Of Hope

Having gotten that pep talk from Otto and Patrasche, Subaru is for the moment saved from his mental turmoil.

There's still lots of things about the events in the dream castle that he hasn't swallowed down yet, but he nevertheless needs to work them out one-by-one and use them as his encouragement.

Subaru: "Not gonna be getting any more help from Echidna now..."

The WITCH OF GREED Echidna had worn a friendly veneer as she observed Subaru's struggling. Considering their final exchange, Subaru would prefer to doubt that comprised the absolute entirety of it, but a witch is a witch and they don't stray from their principles.

Subaru had keenly realised such by seeing the other five witches—Sekhmet, Daphne, Camilla, Typhon, and Minerva. From Subaru's perspective they were assuredly not beings entirely suffused in evil. However, under no circumstance would he call them virtuous creatures.

And that went even for Minerva, whose creed was to heal people. Her attitude as she threw everything into healing another, despite having lost her legs and arm, was really less 'dignified' and more 'horrific'.

And the final witch, Satella—Really, Subaru would prefer to put thinking about her off for later. The incomprehensible emotions which boiled up from inside Subaru in response to Satella. Finding the answer behind these, what with his present crunch-time situation, Subaru instinctively understands as dangerous.

The final words they shared at their parting. And the Satella he saw then—just

by remembering her figure in that moment, crazed emotion rips at his chest from inside, near to destroying it.

Thus while consciously avoiding thinking about Satella, Subaru directs his thoughts to other issues. Those being, the advice Echidna had given him at the end, and whether or not he should accept what Satella said wholesale.

Subaru: "Treat yourself dearly, I mean it's fine saying it, but..."

By meeting with Satella and encountering the first and second TRIALS in the tomb, Subaru learned that the people he desired not to die equally would grieve over Subaru's DEATH. —He wound up acknowledging his true feelings that he did not want to die.

But that said, now what to do? Nothing has changed about his weapons on-hand being paltry. Nothing has changed about the over-abundant problems which remain unsolved. Or hell, the number of people he has to rely on for solving these problems has actually decreased.

While his heart has been somewhat renewed, everything else has degraded rather than advanced. Subaru: "Rely on those who think dearly of you... but how am I supposed to do that...."

Just be frank with the truth and ask them for help, is probably what it meant.

But the one banning him from doing this is none other than Satella—or actually, going from the flow of the conversation in the dream, the one prohibiting Subaru from talking about RETURN BY DEATH may be the Witch of Envy personality. Satella had different ideas than the split personality,

maybe. And the meaning of her final call to him was—

Subaru: “—I goddamn said this isn't the time to be thinking about this.”

Noticing that his thoughts are flowing down into thinking about Satella, Subaru hoists the breaks. What he needs to do is divine and consider concrete plans for resolving the various problems.

Subaru: “Garfiel's scared of the outside world... huh.”

This was Echidna's final piece of advice, and likely necessary information for breaking through this entire situation.

Garfiel had already practically confessed that he had taken the first TRIAL, and Echidna's statement backed that up.

The problem is, what did he see in his past that made him scared of the outside world?

That he refrained to leave SANCTUARY alongside Frederica was probably not unrelated to this trauma. Subaru doubts this problem is one Garfiel will openly divulge if asked upfront.

Subaru: “Which means all that's left's to get it out of someone who'd know... Frederica and Lewes-san both felt tight-lipped about it before...”

If he's to trust Frederica's telling, then she was unable to follow Garfiel into the tomb, and consequently she would not know the details of the TRIAL. On the flipside, being that Lewes had rushed inside to drag Garfiel out, it's probably safe to think that at least one of the doubles has taken the TRIAL. Likely, she would also know the details of Garfiel's TRIAL.

Subaru: “And so... don't really wanna do it, but, reliable plan'd be to get the

command right from the Lewes Meyer crystal, and ask her to tell me.”

Not even the main Lewes personalities can defy someone with the command right. There is coercive potential here.

To take this action has more value than just information gathering, as he would procure over 20 collaborators. Is the logic Subaru uses to try and persuade himself.

Subaru: “—”

What arises in Subaru's mind is SANCTUARY, burning, and a horde of white rabbits. A wretched memory, of urging the Lewes doubles one after another to protect him so that he could escape.

I must run to Emilia. Subaru used this statement as his justifiable duty as mindlessly gave the Lewes orders, and albeit covered in wounds, he managed to sprint into the tomb.

While he hadn't reflected on or regretted his actions, now that he looks back at it with a cool head, the rashness of the deed horrifies even him.

And especially now that he has realised his own piteousness of not wanting to die.

Could he not with more arrogance, with more candour, have made the girls sacrifice themselves? He could not fully trust himself, even though he would prefer not to do such a thing.

Subaru: “My head's a mess... I'm going way too far in a negative way, shit. I'm thinking all about this and that and this and my brain's gonna exceed capacity. Let's start by one-by-one eliminating the things I can eliminate.”

Subaru starts by searching for a problem which seems liable to go in a positive direction.

Subaru: "Having finished the first TRIAL, I should be the one to free SANCTUARY. There's no need for Emilia to shoulder any greater load. Or actually, since putting Emilia under too much pressure means her mental state goes something awful it's a no go."

Subaru thinks back on Emilia, drawing near to him sweetly in the snowed-over SANCTUARY.

It's obvious that Emilia turning out like that resulted from her mind snapping as she continuously challenged the TRIAL. Making her continually face the TRIAL would lead to no good result.

Subaru: "We'll make clearing the TRIAL my problem, and... next point of bother's the second TRIAL. Held in there a while, but... with all that, does that mean I've already cleared it?"

For anyone other than Subaru, the uncomeatable present might just be simple observation of parallel worlds. But for Subaru alone did the TRIAL truly bear its fangs.

With varied regrets, resulting from various tragedies, variable laments had mourned Subaru's death. Experiencing it all with these eyes, this skin, had shattered Subaru's heart and mind to pieces.

Remembering it sends chills running through his body, and besets his limbs with unavoidable numbness.

It was just when he squatted down, swallowed by the shrieking of his heart,

that he was dragged into the dream castle—but what wound up happening with the actual TRIAL?

He's cleared it—is not the situation he is in.

But then what should he do to clear the second TRIAL? Unlike with the first TRIAL, he can't figure it out at all.

Subaru: “Mulling over it won't get me anywhere. ...I just have to do the things I can do.”

Shaking his head, Subaru forces his indecisive heart back up straight. As he puts his hand to the tomb wall at his back, his glare lands on the entrance to darkness.

Subaru had been alone as he thought matters over, with neither Patrasche nor Otto at his side.

That last exchange had stupid-embarrassed him and he had gotten Otto to take Patrasche back to the stables. Although Patrasche's maintained and concerned gaze was a grace, he wanted some time alone to sort out his thoughts.

Subaru: “The issues that need sorting out are SANCTUARY and the mansion. In SANCTUARY is the TRIAL, Garfiel, and the Sizeable Hare. In the mansion is Beatrice and Elsa... going over the limit for multitasking, here.”

Subaru has not a single plan for resolving any one of these ordeals as he falls into dejection. But, he has no time to be depressed. Now is to steadily eliminate these problems one by one.

Without thinking about throwaway lives, or other such things.

Subaru: "First is to confirm the status of the TRIAL. If the second TRIAL starts then that's okay, if it's ended and the third TRIAL starts then that's okayer."

If he can speed up the removal of the barrier then that will greatly spur everything to action. Garfiel will have to start thinking about how he'll act as well, and worst case even supposing the Sizeable Hare attacks, they should be capable of escaping outside. It's pretty inconceivable that even Garfiel would persist in stubbornness when faced with the Sizeable Hare.

Removing the barrier would make SANCTUARY's problems start heading toward resolution. Thinking that far, Subaru sees a faint glimmer of hope arising before him, and so comes relief.

He had mused over the many problems roiling his brain, and now he saw something which seemed a route for reaching the answer.

Subaru: "—"

Standing at the entrance to the tomb, Subaru swallows his breath as he looks through the dim, at the stonework corridor.

If he goes inside and the TRIAL starts, he may be faced with the uncomeatable present again. Subaru would never get used to those scenes, no matter how many times he saw them.

But he knew he was not permitted to either ignore or forget them. And so if he cannot avoid them, then he must challenge.

Subaru takes a deep inhale, holds his breath, and steps forth.

Treading into the tomb, he wills to challenge the TRIAL for the sake of freeing SANC— Subaru: "—!?"

The moment he steps inside, a jolt rocks Subaru like a punch to the skull.

The pain is like needles stabbing directly into his brain, his footing falling unsteady, lights scattering about his vision. His upper body sways languorously as he is unable to stand, and he collapses on the spot.

A tremendous nausea seethes up, a churning pain assaults his stomach as he chokes on acid. He coughs, but no matter how he repeats so his body fails to get any more eased.

The alarm bells, the bells, the sirens are ringing.

With his body caught in ongoing discord and disharmony, Subaru pants as he tumbles toward the tomb's exit. And he instinctively senses. Should he step inside, proceed in further, the wickedness tormenting his body would increase in ferocity.

Subaru: "Ghb, ghkk, haah, bahgh, uehgh"

Tumbled out of the tomb, Subaru puts his hand to the grass as he pukes, pukes, and pukes.

The moment that his body completely exits the tomb, the agony tormenting Subaru fades distant. The headache, the nausea, the numbness in his limbs all thin out. Subaru raises his head with his eyes teary.

Subaru: "Aeu, uhg, what was, that?"

Subaru looks at the tomb entrance. Just as he reaches out to crawl toward it, a primordial rejection festers up from inside him.

This was no great problem such as trauma due to fearing the TRIAL's content. —It was that he plainly understood that the tomb was rejecting him.

Subaru: "What, is..."

Rejecting him. In realising this, Subaru immediately figures what has happened to him.

Patrasche had been wounded as she went inside to pull Subaru out. Roswaal had been wounded as he entered the tomb in an attempt to challenge the TRIAL. The tomb rejects creatures which lack the qualifications to challenge the TRIAL. Supposing that that effect had just activated on Subaru...

Subaru: "That shouldn't be... I mean, then that..."

Standing up, Subaru challenges the tomb with tottering gait and determination.

But the instant he steps inside the headache and nausea return. Overwhelming ailment keeps Subaru from even standing, crushing him.

Subaru: "Haah... haahh... hahh..."

Stepping back, Subaru takes ragged breaths as he distances himself from the tomb entrance. This last attempt has forced Subaru to accept the truth that he had already comprehended.

Subaru: "That, asshole..."

What skims through Subaru's mind is a white-haired witch in a mourning dress. At their parting, she had indeed asked this of Subaru:

Will you choose to take my hand, or to take Satella's?

Subaru had gone without taking Echidna's hand, instead taking Satella's. If this was her revenge for Subaru's actions, then that was incredibly— Subaru: “And that glimmer of hope is..!”

And it came at the end of the end, just when he had believed she had given him a hint wholly out of goodwill, and accordingly thought kinder of her.

Echidna: <—You're not wrong in the least.>

Hearing the mischievous voice of a witch he should not be hearing, Subaru looks up to the night sky.

Subaru: “Revoking my qualifications... you said nothing about this, ECHIDNAAA!!

—Natsuki Subaru had lost the qualifications to challenge the TRIAL to free SANCTUARY.

Chapter 82: A Conversation

Subaru: "So no, it wasn't my imagination or any kind of mistake..."

Touching his hand to the crystal before him, sensing no signs of anything happening, Subaru presses his forehead to the cold, hard jewel as he gives a lamenting sigh.

The girl sleeping inside the crystal—the original Lewes Meyer—gives no reaction to Subaru's laments. While the girl in her eternal sleep ideally would give no reply to Subaru's call, a reaction which should be coming plainly isn't.

That being,

Subaru: "My qualifications've been disqualified, so even if I touch the crystal, the command right for the Lewes-san doubles isn't transferring to me..."

The command right for the Lewes Meyer doubles was a privilege that only APOSTLES OF GREED could acquire.

Subaru, who had been rejected by Echidna and had his qualifications revoked, apparently did not deserve to be in that role.

Standing inside the test facility with its dingy air, Subaru finds himself lost on what to do as the glimmer of hope he saw now fades.

Worst case, and truly worst case, the trauma Subaru experienced from witnessing the second TRIAL had made him hesitate to tread inside the tomb. Should this be the case, then the problem here is entirely Subaru's mental state. But should he take drastic measures to challenge the tomb over and over, eventually he would manage to strongarm his weak heart into it.

But if the problem lies outside of Subaru's workable reach, it's nothing going.

That he cannot enter the tomb whenever he wants also means that he cannot speak directly with Echidna for regaining his qualifications.

And before getting to that, would the witches appear before Subaru again, considering their last parting? Probably not, was his instinctive understanding.

That he understands this means that the plan of Subaru conquering the TRIAL has disappeared, and freeing SANCTUARY must be entrusted to someone other than Subaru.

Meaning,

Subaru: "Saying to put Emilia through it... I think?"

Voicing the predicament he was most afraid of, a desire to shower Echidna's insidiousness with curses wells up inside Subaru.

Echidna could read Subaru's memories. Only Echidna could observe these repeating worlds the same way that Subaru did. And so Echidna should know of Emilia, her mind broken from repeated solo challenges of the TRIAL, crushed.

Echidna should have known how he was frantic himself, desperately trying to avoid that outcome. Regardless, then, the WITCH OF GREED was forcing hardship on Subaru and Emilia.

Subaru: "What do I do, what do I do, whatdoidowhatdoldowhaddaldowhat..."

Thoughts blazing, Subaru forces his mind to solder as he searches for a plan. But even though he overtaxes his braincells to the point that his synapses scorch, following the loss of his glimmer of hope he finds no plan B.

The situation is on a one-way road to worsening, and the people he has to rely on have only reduced in number.

A character, who knows the situation and thus understands enough to listen pleasantly to Subaru's words.

A somebody, who would accept the information Subaru could not be upfront about, and still participate in conversation.

Mulling over things alone wouldn't result in anything. Echidna could not be relied on anymore. Meaning that now, there was only one person who Subaru could share his problems with.

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Roswaal: "Iiiiiii certainly didn't expect for you to be visiting so late aaaaaaat night."

Subaru: "...Really, this all-preparations-set vibe feels more like you were waiting. Not like you snuffed the lights to sleep, feels more you just lit the flame."

Roswaal: "Ahaaaa, how haaaaaarsh. But, well, yooooooou're not wrong in the slightest."

Leaned against his pillow as he uprights himself in the bed, Roswaal's cheeks relax as he welcomes Subaru. While most of the lights in Roswaal's bedroom have been snuffed, the flame of the candle of his little bedside table has just been changed, its amber light swaying as it illuminates the room.

The shade of the entrancing, wavering fire casts an eerie shadow over Roswaal's pallid face. Subaru swallows his breath as he gets to facing the

conversation.

Should Subaru's knowledge be correct, then a conversation with Roswaal would—

Roswaal: "Aaaaaaand so? You've purposefully come prowling here in the dead of night. Haaaaave you perhaps come with some flirtation tooooo coax my attentions?"

Subaru: "...Coax you, isn't incorrect. Roswaal, is there a way to get through SANCTUARY without doing the TRIAL?"

Roswaal: "—"

With that one sentence alone, Roswaal's smile wreathes with a disgusting chill.

The clown's grin stretches wide. He strokes his navy hair as he nods several times, gazing at Subaru with his yellow eye.

Roswaal: "Subaru-kun. —What attempt are you currently on?"

That question was a conversation-controller, stating that they were both aware of the superficial layer of what the other knew.

It would give Roswaal the truth that Subaru was Returning by Death, and give Subaru the truth that Roswaal was in a position to know this.

Subaru thus must present concessions, while amending Roswaal's information. With a short sigh, Subaru gives a purposefully emphasized shrug.

Subaru: "Sorry, but it's at a point where counting'd be idiotic. I can't remember how many times we've probed each other out like this, either."

Roswaal: “I... see. Uuuuuunderstood, uuuuuunderstod. That you're speaking with these rationalizations.... wooooould mean I'm free to think it's that, coooooorrect?”

Subaru: “Well, who could say.”

Subaru averts his gaze, toying cat and mouse with Roswaal.

But he does not overlook how his words have led Roswaal's cheeks to stiffen. Or the fact that he has seized the initiative of the conversation with this opening move.

—While Roswaal may know that Subaru is looping, that does not mean he retains memories of the loops like Subaru does.

Subaru learned that fact in the loop where Roswaal revealed he knew about RETURN BY DEATH. It was also where he learned of Roswaal's incomprehensible tenacity, where while understanding that he himself would end with death, he attempted to use Subaru's RETURN BY DEATH to lead to his desired outcome.

Even now Subaru inevitably feels Roswaal's thinking disgusting and odious, but—

Subaru: “Right now in the middle of some trial and error. Kinda wanting your cooperation.”

Subaru came up with the idea to put on a performance, so that Roswaal would mistakenly believe that Subaru was acting as Roswaal intended.

Presently, Roswaal unmistakably knows more of SANCTUARY's affairs than Subaru. It's unclear how much Roswaal's GOSPEL documents what will happen next, and so it's hard to iron everything out, but considering Roswaal's mutterings when he sighted the Sizeable Hare, it's surmisable that the gospel's writ had not been detailed to that extent.

Meaning, so long as he does not screw up with his word choice, Subaru can definitely extract information from Roswaal while simultaneously deceiving him.

Roswaal: "And part of that trial and error is overcoming SANCTUARY without challenging the TRIAL... is it? liiiiiiif so, that is raaaaaaaaather faint-hearted. With your authority, consequent to your infinite attempts it should be possible for you to overcome hardships without fail. I don't know how many times you have attempted... but abandoning it aaaaaaaand searching for another method would surely suggest an iiiiiinsufficient resolve?"

Subaru: "Getting inflexible and picky about everything resting on beating the TRIAL isn't what I'd call a sharp way to do things. If there's a smoother method I'll pick that, that's all. Losing sight of substance 'cause you're fussing over style's idiotic. Point is the necessary stuff's that we escape from this place and the achievements go to Emilia... am I wrong, Roswaal?"

While maintaining a calm and indifferent face, Subaru scrutinizes his statements word-by-word in real time to ensure he's making no mistakes. He checks everything the moment before it comes off his tongue, his tale-spinning operations whittling away at his nerves—but this mental fraying is necessary for deceiving Roswaal.

The logic he speaks is heartless—most likely, this is exactly the Subaru that Roswaal wants to see. There's no doubt that Roswaal wants Emilia to be Ruler,

and for Subaru to be helping in that.

Subaru reckons that the more callous his methods are, the more Roswaal would deem them desirable.

And, sure enough,

Roswaal: “liiiiiii see... that is indeed an answer tooooo my liking.” Roswaal smiles in full satisfaction to Subaru's reply.

Subaru bites the inside of his cheek as he sees the foulness of that clown-painted visage intensify, barely managing to preserve his nonchalant expression.

Roswaal's disturbing gaze suggests that he had deemed Subaru of the same breed as him. Meaning that Roswaal had judged Subaru as being in the same standing as his own grade-A incomprehensible self. —The visceral disgust inside Subaru festers.

Roswaal: “Whiiiiile I certainly find the changes in your thinking wonderful, aaaaaaaaaanswering your question is rather difficult. There are no precedents. After all, the barrier has never been broken since its establishment. I've never considered whether there may be tears in it, since considering the being who placed it, it would be best to abandon aaaaaaaall optimistic hopes for such oversights.”

Subaru: “It's Echidna's barrier...”

Roswaal: “Eeeeeexactly. SANCTUARY's cemetery is her gravestone, with the barrier being something to prevent the half-bloods she used pre-death in her experiments from escaping.

...Aaaaaaaalthough I'm sure you would have aaaaaaaalready investigated into this much.”

Subaru: "Well, course. Just saying, I know about the Lewes Meyer facility in the woods, too. And about the doubles, and that Garfiel has the command right."

Roswaal: "Aahaaaaaa, that doooooes speed matters up."

Subaru responds to Roswaal's showing of information by carefully revealing his own cards. Roswaal closes his eyes, sighing in thought.

Roswaal: "The liberation of SANCTUARY is an indispensable achievement for Emilia-sama to be Ruler. Should you stray from proper methods, theeeeeeee people of SANCTUARY and the people of Arlam Village will not be apt to consider it one."

Subaru: "So long as we can at least get them outside, we've got lots of ways we can fudge that part over. And besides this isn't the only chance we have to reap achievements. Judging this opportunity as bad and standing by for another one'd be..."

Roswaal: "Another opportunity? Why are you back tooooooo saying this?" Roswaal's eyes widen in bewilderment as Subaru senses his gaffe.

A Subaru resolved to scour himself away as he completes countless redos—was the Subaru that

Subaru was presently preforming.

With that Subaru's bloodthirsty thinking, he would have no reason to pass up the chance to attain the achievements sitting right in front of him.

Before Roswaal's doubts can develop further, and without letting his regret

show on his expression, Subaru comes up with words.

Subaru: "Just try thinking about it."

Subaru: "As you've realised, I can toil in efforts to make Emilia Ruler to any degree I want. Because I can do rehearsals of the future to come back with information. Dunno how this'll sound but, freeing SANCTUARY's a tiny event with few people involved. We should be putting our efforts into things like the White Whale or the Witch Cult, stuff that'll have a greater impact. —This isn't a place meriting that I put in that much effort."

Roswaal: "...Noooooo, liberating SANCTUARY is indispensable. Allow me to set that as a point beyond compromise. You see, I still inevitably have my doubts when it coooooomes to your power."

Subaru: "Doubts?"

Subaru tilts his head as the conversation flows in an unanticipated direction. Roswaal nods. Roswaal: "Indeed."

Roswaal: "Iiiiiii cannot with my own eyes affirm your authority to redo. Iiiiiit's also possible that I'm not coooooonvinced by your wheedling. Though naaaaaaturally, should results come about alongside I'm afraid I wooooooould be forced to acquiesce."

Subaru says nothing.

Roswaal: "I will plainly assert that for making Emilia-sama the Ruler, my power... the aid of the Mathers Family is necessary and iiiiindispensable. Liberating SANCTUARY would be what makes me believe your power to assist

Emilia-sama is legitimate, and from there we would be tied in a positive relationship.... iiiiiis about how I would preeeeefer you to regard this.”

Is Roswaal's sound logic as he narrows his eyes. Subaru is speechless. Everything Roswaal is saying is valid, and Subaru can think of no real rebuttal.

Emilia requires a backer for her stand the theatre of the Royal Selection, and there is no one influential around except Roswaal who seems liable to do that.

Following commands so as not to displease your patron is correct. With the soundness of Roswaal's views and the urgency of the situation, it's excessively correct.

But even while jostled by those waves of reason, Subaru feels an unease. Because Roswaal seems far too fixated on the liberation of SANCTUARY itself. Subaru: “I kinda think this's changing track of the conversation, but...” Roswaal: “Hm? Yeeeeees?”

Subaru raises his finger to draw attention. Roswaal tilts his head. Focusing firm on Roswaal's odd-coloured eyes, Subaru speaks.

Subaru: “Is there a reason for you to unconditionally want SANCTUARY freed?” Roswaal: “—”

Roswaal responds to the question with simple silence.

Silence, as his grin slowly deepens, and his yellow eye's gaze pierces Subaru.

—Subaru senses on his skin that once again, the situation's mood is changing.

Chapter 83: Mutual Confessions

Feeling the prickling pressure on his skin, Subaru understands that his statement has touched on the core of Roswaal's motives.

Roswaal's smile now was the same breed of grin that he had given before being devoured by hares in the snow, as he revealed a portion of his plans.

Roswaal: "Nooooooooow why is it you think that?"

Although late, Roswaal's obfuscations show no desire to move the conversation forward. Subaru clicks his tongue.

Subaru: "Say why or say whatever,"

Subaru: "It's cause the way you're turning down my proposal doesn't feel sincere. When you throw on a condition right at the start that freeing SANCTUARY's required, of course I'm gonna suspect something."

Roswaal: "Which is why I believe I followed on the subject with a logical explanation. Further, it is also essential that I receive proof for our henceforth collaborations. Emilia-sama's persistent foundation and aid—that being, you and your guidance to the most appropriate solutions standing at her side. It is in this that I want you to make me believe. The requirement for that is liberating SANCTUARY."

Subaru: "But my thinking's that it doesn't have to be liberation, whatever methods to escape from here'd be fine. If you're looking for chances for me to

prove myself, we can prepare lots of opportunities for it later, and..."

Roswaal: "Actually I would like to ask you."

In rebuttal to Subaru, Roswaal raises a finger. Subaru, interrupted, falls silent as Roswaal gives a collected nod.

Roswaal: "You doooooo seem dreadfully timid aaaaaaaabout the TRIAL. Almost as if there is some reason in it for you to not desire to free SANCTUARY?"

Subaru: "Like hell I don't want to! I wanna get this barrier open fast and drag the problems unsolvable inside to the outside... but."

Roswaal: "But?"

Words piling up on each other before he can notice it, Subaru realises that he is close to getting sucked into Roswaal's rhythm. If he starts chatting, yelling without thinking, the con is going to fall into Roswaal's victory.

As calm as he can, Subaru chooses his words.

Subaru: "I don't wanna see Emilia's heart wounded from challenging that TRIAL."

Roswaal: "Which is exactly what your authority's for? Should Emilia-sama stumble with the TRIAL, all you need to do is substitute for her. This is without issue. The important thing is the actuality of the liberation, would be your

logic."

Subaru: "Nh, guh..."

Near-convinced by words he himself had spoken, Subaru bites his lip as he searches for something to say. But, advocating ridiculousness atop ridiculousness would not not lead to him saying anything particularly sensible.

Subaru: "Of course I know that it's fine whether it's me or Emilia who beats the TRIAL. That thing bringing up past wounds is too hard for Emilia. I know I should be substituting... but."

Roswaal: "Please don't start spouting any naivety about the TRIAL being too painful for yourself as well, and so yooooooooou're searching for a bypath."

Roswaal's gaze harshens, his words compound in sharpness.

Roswaal: "Your own piteousness, and the pain for yourself... if that is why you mean to find an alternate method, then that's all your feelings for Emilia-sama aaaaaaaaaamount to?"

Subaru: "That's not..!"

Roswaal: "What it is? Truly? How can you possibly assert that? How can you make anyone believe that? When you think of Emilia-sama, then you should naturally swallow down all hurt and pain and suffering. Supposing you love Emilia-sama, naturally you should be capable of this. Should you hold Emilia-sama dearer than anything, prioritise Emilia-sama over everything, regard all other as minuscule existences present for the sake of bolstering Emilia-sama to

greater heights... surely there would be no issue?"

Roswaal's fluently-spoken words and instructive tempo threaten to engulf Subaru.

While Roswaal's statements are the very image of extreme logic, should one understand Subaru's RETURN BY DEATH, then this is an obvious conclusion to reach.

Had this been an earlier Subaru, before Satella had revealed his true feelings at the tea party, then he ultimately might find himself agreeing with this logic.

—Right. That was it.

Subaru had intended to declare to Roswaal that he would never be like him.

But, assuming for hypothesis that he had taken Echidna's hand at the tea party, then surely he would be living exactly the lifestyle Roswaal desired.

Abandoning all thought, picking through his options, seeking only the results, slighting absolutely everything.

No matter how much I am injured, so long as Emilia and everyone else is smiling in the desired future beyond, that is fine—was what he had thought.

But would that Natsuki Subaru, having elected only to withstand suffering, ultimately be able to smile at their side as they were?

—Would he be capable of anything more than something faint and dry, spurred by the obligation that he needed to smile?

Subaru: "...What you're saying's, in a sense, probably correct, Roswaal."
Roswaal: "In a sense?"

Closing his eye, Roswaal tilts his head at Subaru's meaningful reply. With his yellow gaze staring at him, Subaru spits his words.

Subaru: "As you say, if I throw away everything and try protecting only Emilia... she's almost guaranteed to be within saving. But that's not enough."

Roswaal: "Not enough..."

Subaru: "I'll save Emilia. But saving just Emilia isn't enough to satisfy me. Rem, and Beatrice, the SANCTUARY guys and mansion guys, all the people who helped me in the Capital... I want to save everyone together."

Roswaal: "—"

Subaru: "Your lifestyle of being satisfied with just one person isn't possible for me. Honestly right now I can't tell whether it's you or me who's the greedy one."

The attitude of persistently loving a single person, and abandoning everything for them was in a way, beautiful.

Describe it as being in LOVE, and that is exactly the noble deed it is.

Roswaal's methods might be the absolute in perfection for a single man's lifestyle.

But to pull this off required horrifying resolve. A soul-whittling life of scouring away everything except his precious one was likely impossible for Subaru.

Subaru's capabilities remained minuscule as ever—and Subaru remained just as much a selfish child as ever.

Roswaal: "...It seeeeeeeeems your methods for polishing your resolve yet remain iiiiiiiinsufficient." Subaru says nothing.

Roswaal: "For a slight... yes, for just a slight, I had hopes. That peeeeeeeerhaps, I might see my desired future. But... it doesn't seem like that's poooooossible."

Unfortunate, says the shake of Roswaal's head.

Their exchange had just revealed to Roswaal that Subaru was undecided on whether he possessed the resolve that Roswaal intended.

For a Roswaal who desired a Subaru ready to conquer with unfeeling resolve, this present Subaru was disappointing and defective. It simultaneously meant he was witnessing the endpoint of his life.

Roswaal: "I wonder just how many more times... are you going tooooooo discourage me."

Subaru: "If that's what you think then I'd say it's fine for you to be more cooperative with me. If you could be more unsparing with helping me out, that solves the majority of the problems."

Announces Subaru rather ironically to the disappointed Roswaal.

Subaru, devoid of any combat ability, desperately craved Roswaal's assistance. His incredible magic which rained fire on a forest of witchbeasts, and skills which accurately scorched the attacking hares—for countering the Sizeable Hare, Roswaal was indispensable.

Said the other way around, if Subaru could secure Roswaal as an ally then that alone would resolve most of the problems in SANCTUARY.

But Roswaal shakes his head at Subaru's cheap-but-reliable request.

Roswaal: "My apologies for the disappointment, but I cannot. Collaborating with the present you presents far too few benefits fooooooor me. Hypothetically... yes, let's hypothetically say that I assist you, and by that you overcome this situation. Your resolve will remain uncertain, and in the future you and Emilia-sama will assuredly crash into further obstacles... will you then rely on me again? Postponing the resolve that you truly should have sorted out here, and panicking bewildered once you fall into an unrecoverable situation?"

Subaru says nothing.

Roswaal: "You see, Subaru-kun, I... cannot give my assistance unless it is to someone I can trust for achieving my goal. A relationship entirely of your dependence is unneeded for my purposes. And so I want you to do whatever you can to convince me, and show me you have the resolve to go forward."

Subaru: "Your, goal..."

Roswaal: "In this attempt it appears it will go unfulfilled, and that is a regret. I am placing my hopes in the next opportunity. When you are truly, and correctly capable of accepting your power."

This talk is over, says Roswaal's posture as his body loses its strength, and he lies down on the bed. Roswaal had just lost any meaning for his PRESENT self to live. Likely his intentions are to resignedly watch Subaru proceed to fail and redo, to conclusion.

Should the conversation end on him here, Subaru will remain without achieving a single one of the purposes he came here for.

Watching as Roswaal waves his hand to urge Subaru out of the room, Subaru frantically forces himself to think.

Subaru: "...What's a way I can demonstrate my resolve that'll convince you?"

Roswaal: "Hrm... sincerely speaking, I would prefer you surmise that by your ongoing interactions with me, but no matter how many reattempts you make for that purpose it will be a completely pointless waste of time."

Putting his hand to his chin, Roswaal again uprights himself.

Roswaal: "The framework is that liberating SANCTUARY would achieve that. But your actions are essential for liberating SANCTUARY, and you must be fit with the resolve to not mind reattempting regardless the number of tries. SANCTUARY being liberated of itself is proof of your hardened resolve."

Subaru: "But why is that? While yeah when it comes to answers that might be the closest you can get, but if it's only that... if it's just surmounting the TRIAL, then how does that connect to me being resolved to throw away everything? Potential for Emilia to overcome the TRIAL herself.."

Roswaal: "Is non-existent."

Sensing that Roswaal's statements are incredibly extreme, Subaru impulsively lines up the rebuttals. But Roswaal's response is cutting, and entirely cold.

The sharpness of the reply daunts Subaru. Roswaal wags his finger.

Roswaal: "Your flickering hopes will not come to fruition. Emilia-sama will never overcome the TRIAL. That thing has too weak a nature for it."

Subaru: "...That thing?"

Roswaal: "Entirely. I'm sure some of it is from circumstances of her upbringing and traditions, but that thing is useless. She can't even stand by herself, she is a small, weak, brittle child. Watching her act out of guilt and remorse is so courageous I even feel pity."

Having never heard Roswaal judge Emilia in this way before, Subaru is speechless.

Courageous, tenacious, soft-hearted and eager Emilia. Right now she was caught in a bad turn of fate and unable to solve the TRIAL. But, Subaru believed that given her time she would assuredly conquer her past, and that she had the strength to lead SANCTUARY to its freedom.

That Subaru was thinking to take over the TRIAL in Emilia's place was because the necessary time wasn't there, and he couldn't bear seeing a wounded Emilia.

Not because he had given up, and judged that Emilia was incapable of beating the TRIAL. Subaru: "And you still think Emilia can't... then why, so then why did you bring her!?"

Roswaal: "Because you're here. With your presence, even a weak, powerless half-elf can aim for the throne. No, they will take the throne. Of course. You'll remove all contrary paths, and make her desires come realised. That is the power vested in you. If Emilia-sama is to have any value, it is in holding the strongest card, which is you, in hand."

Subaru: "I'm... the strongest, card?"

Roswaal's piling and dizzying statements, these fantastical words about him being strongest, lead Subaru into utter confusion.

These are adjectives foreign to his powerless self. And Roswaal's words are quite incredibly insulting toward Emilia, and unforgivable.

Subaru: "Just fuck off! How much do you think Emilia's... that Emilia's pushed herself, thought things over, suffered in challenging this fucking TRIAL! Forced to look at a past she doesn't want to see, but still she... she's trying so hard! And you're saying—!"

Roswaal: "All is worthless without results. And that these results aren't coming, you should know far, faaaaaaaaaar better thaaaaaaaaan I. If Emilia-sama's efforts had produced results, then you would've had no reason to reeeeeeture here."

Subaru: "—hk!"

Subaru can shout himself ragged in rage, but Roswaal's composure remains unassailed. Far the opposite—as if his superheated thoughts have been doused in water, Subaru reaches a conclusion of utter speechlessness.

Roswaal's statement had captured a portion of the truth.

As far as Subaru had seen, there would be no attempt where Emilia would overcome the TRIAL. The barricade of the past would stand in her way through her continued challenges, and every time she hit it, her heart would fold and abrade.

Unable to lean on her relied-upon Puck, a fully-abraded Emilia would eventually mistake her dependency on Subaru for love, and break.

And because Subaru knew that future, he couldn't rebut Roswaal even with an emotional argument. But there was no way he could stay silent and ignore insults to Emilia.

Roswaal, looking down on Emilia and expecting far too much of Subaru's RETURN BY DEATH. How best to dispirit him—the instant he thinks it, Subaru shouts.

Subaru: "Fine, yeah, I get what you're saying! But y'know! Your plan's still going nowhere!" Roswaal: "Hm, and what would you..."

Subaru: "So here you want me to beat the TRIAL instead of Emilia... but Echidna revoked my qualifications to take the TRIAL! You're not gonna be getting the outcome you're hoping for from me! Too bad, huh!"

Yells Subaru with his hand to his chest, aiming his words at Roswaal composed face.

It was a painful affair for Subaru himself, but it should be a devastating blow for Roswaal and his plans. No way even Roswaal could keep calm faced with this, says the crooked smile Subaru intends to make, when—

Roswaal: "—Revoked, your qualifications?"

The sound is muttered, desolate, and feeble—that Subaru is slow to realise it came from Roswaal.

Roswaal, right there leaned on the bed, has frozen rigid. His eyes stand open still and wide, lips trembling as he looks at Subaru.

As if his usual composed attitude, all-knowing air, and untouchable queerness —had all peeled away.

Roswaal: "What could it mean..."

Subaru: "What could it? ...It means what it means."

Called upon in faltering voice, Subaru unwittingly answers with his own tone unstrung. Overwhelmed by a diction which sounds nothing like the Roswaal he knows, Subaru wets his thirsting throat with spit.

Subaru: "Echidna disqualified me. Forget the doubles' command right, I'm in a situation where just trying to enter the tomb is vertigo. ...I'm in the same position as you, of being rejected if I try going in."

Roswaal: "How, come... no, why had this... You take the TRIAL in the tomb... otherwise, this SANCTUARY's liberation, her wish..."

Hand to his mouth, Roswaal mutters in empty voice, his expression one of disbelief.

Seeing this unexpectedly intense reaction, Subaru senses his statement had more effect than just revenge, himself falling lost for words. Roswaal panicking was something he had never seen in this loop series, or more rather never seen at all, and he was beginning to lose sight of what part of their conversation could have such an impact on him.

Subaru swallows his breath.

Subaru: "Does your gospel say that I beat the TRIAL?" Roswaal: "—"

Subaru: "I know that if doesn't go according to the writ, you're ready to abandon everything. If you've decided that defeating SANCTUARY is my role... now, it won't happen."

Like how his victory over the first TRIAL carried over, like how the witches

could share his memories happening across RETURN BY DEATHS, the Witch of Greed's castle was separated from the principles of this world.

Even should he RETURN BY DEATH, that would not weaken the memories or feelings from there. Which was why Subaru had felt saved there, and had harboured more than a little fondness for Echidna. —Thus, he knows now.

Even should he hypothetically die and return to the tomb, Subaru would not regain his qualifications.

He would need Echidna's permission to reattain them, he would need to enter the tomb to gain Echidna's permission, and he would need the qualifications to enter the tomb.

—In short, Subaru had perfectly lost means to challenge the tomb's TRIAL. Roswaal: "Ways to regain the qualifications..."

Subaru: "If there are any, you'd know better than me. If you're saying you don't know it, I don't know it."

Although answering to Roswaal's faint voice, Subaru internally does notice a possibility.

Most likely, Echidna was even now watching Subaru's struggles and hardships from inside her tomb. She probably revoked the qualifications in something of a bedevilment toward Subaru who had rejected her hand, and was looking to see what a Subaru who had taken Satella's hand could do. If along that process the failures piled up on Subaru, and without any cards left to play he came crying and clinging back to Echidna, the witch would probably offer him her hand.

—But should he take Echidna's hand the next time she presents it, that would mean throwing away every syllable of Satella's words, and every feeling his heart harboured even now in this moment.

A conclusion entirely of sending Emilia off to the optimum future.

But even that may be preferable to a conclusion of being torn to smithereens halfway. Roswaal: "Using your redo to return before the qualifications were revoked...?"

Subaru: "Looks like you're misunderstanding, it's not that infallible of a power. It's not something you can so freely treat as returns without compensation... and besides, the return point's too late. If I go back, it'll be to after the disqualification. Nothing changes about me being unable to enter the tomb."

Roswaal: "I, see..."

Roswaal's voice as he replies is weak, and his visage feels to have aged entirely all in one moment. Roswaal had always acted in a way which was young, or more rather that gave no sense of his actual age, but with how his shoulders are now drooped down small, even that atmosphere is gone. This was the human expression of a man who had held a delusional and obstinate belief for a long, long time, suffering as his wishes are fully hindered in a manner he can do nothing about.

This was the first time Subaru had managed to feel that Roswaal was something of a fellow human. But this fact solved nothing, and was likely entirely involuntary on Roswaal's part.

Subaru: "The stalemate's same for both of us, Roswaal. I think we should have a more proper talk, to search for countermeasures."

Roswaal says nothing.

Subaru: "It might be rough to get the results your gospel tells in it, but it's not like the writ can just be the end of everything. If we just follow the general plot... well you might not agree with that, but if we can come up with a plan for

compromise..."

Roswaal: "...Weren't enough." Subaru: "—Huh?"

Subaru presents his proposal, using words to prompt Roswaal to concede. But with eyes so hollow he may as well not be hearing Subaru, he murmurs something. Unwittingly giving out a noise, Subaru takes one step forth.

Did he just mishear Roswaal?

Roswaal's whispers sneak into Subaru's ear.

Roswaal: "—The methods I used for my cornering weren't enough." Subaru: "What the?"

Roswaal: "The details aren't clear, but Echidna going back on decisions means you and her had an exchange befitting that. Fundamentally it's that before those fissures between you and her could form, you steel your resolve, and then the TRIAL... I didn't succeed."

Subaru: "—"

Roswaal: "If I had just cornered you further... if I had just shown you that reaching out here and there for everything would mean losing what's important... then this wouldn't..."

Subaru: "Wait, Roswaal. Wait."

Although sensing that what Roswaal's about to say will be something absolutely conclusive, and that he must hear it, for some reason Subaru hesitates.

Should he wind up hearing those next words, Subaru surely would not be able to keep standing here.

Absolute conviction.

Or really, rather, he'd already been having suspicions in this vein.

That those quizzical suspicions hadn't taken tangible form was because Subaru's thoughts had frozen on the idea that Roswaal had no reason to do this, and because of the thin but present trust he had in him.

The words Roswaal are about to say will conclusively sever that.

Subaru needs to say something before that can happen. But no matter how hard he looks for the words he can't find them, and time flows on.

Roswaal: "Summoning yourself and Emilia-sama to SANCTUARY while aware of Garfiel's disposition."

Subaru: "—"

Roswaal: "Forcing Emilia-sama to challenge the TRIAL while myself knowing how terrifying it is, showing you her wounded, stirring you up..."

Subaru: "Wait, please wait. Wa—" And,

Roswaal: "Perfecting you by having you lose those precious to you in a place beyond your reach... everything, all of it, and it still wasn't enough."

—Roswaal confesses that the trigger-puller on the mansion murders was himself.

Chapter 84: Denied X Denied X Denied

—Crumbling, crumbling, the earth beneath him crumbling.

Losing sight of his supposedly-present footing, Subaru senses he is falling from someplace high. In reality Subaru stands still and straight inside the middle of the room, his eyes open wide and petrified.

That he regardless feels that sensation is because Roswaal's confession was that incredible of an impact.

Subaru: "Beyond, my reach means..."

Roswaal: "You would've already figured the answer. When one important thing and another important thing are simultaneously faced with peril, people are forced to make choices. You choose which of them is more precious to you, living so as to lose the unchosen. In doing this all except the single, solely precious one is scoured away, and there is perfected the chosen being which you are."

Subaru: "How stupid are you? Perfected being!? Only way I see it is an incredible moron drowning in wounds standing by himself in a gale-swept wasteland!"

Roswaal: "However, your precious one can remain held in a place abounding with verdancy, their purity and beauty preserved. You do prioritize this higher than your own self going uninjured, yes?"

Subaru finds himself stuck silence as Roswaal begins regaining his calm.

It isn't that Roswaal has convinced him, or that he's lost for words to rebut him.

His fuming emotions are simply too incredible in volume, and won't turn into words.

This incomprehensible logic, this gospel and its self-authored enumerations of events, the consequence of this utter neglect to think, was the slaughter at the mansion?

Frederica, Petra, even Beatrice died for this selfish reason?

For this imbecilic goal of perfecting Subaru did their supposedly-trusting master betray them, and so they lost their lives?

Subaru: "Roswaal... are you actually, insane?"

Roswaal: "...Exactly yes, I am extensively insane. Ever since those eyes charmed me four hundred years ago, I have always been insane."

Subaru: "Four hundred...?"

Unable to swallow down the words flung at him, Subaru parrots Roswaal back with his face scrunched up in confusion.

Again it's four hundred years ago—but for Roswaal to be voicing this comes accordant with an incredible unnaturalness. There should be no way for him to know about four hundred years ago. And doubly so with his current phrasing, almost implying that he had existed continuously for four hundred years—

Roswaal: "Natsuki Subaru-kun."

A nearby voice calls on Subaru, his pupils wavering in bewilderment.

Subaru looks to find Roswaal, suddenly standing exactly in front of him. Away from this presence standing tall and within breathing range does Subaru step back—when hands grab his collar, and he is barred from retreat. He is pulled forward, forehead pressed to forehead.

Roswaal: "You have judged me as insane. I will agree with that. Beyond any doubt, I am insane. I am without sanity. A very long time ago, my heart was claimed from me."

Subaru: "Ah, auh..."

Roswaal: "But why is it that you are not insane eeeeeeenough? You should be as insane—no, even more insane than I. Your situation requires insanity to attempt. Because the place you are seeking is far higher than the place I am. For traversing a path of solitude beyond any comprehension or sympathy you have no need for a human heart. Your heart must be strong, solid, as iron—yes?"

Subaru: "Auh, ue.. sh-shut up!"

Every word of Roswaal's as it soaks into Subaru's mind hosts a power to near drag him into the pit of darkness. Subaru shakes his head to dispel the sensation, shoving Roswaal's chest away.

Jabbing his finger at him as he stumbles back, and unable to hide his voice's shaking as he bluffs,

Subaru: "Whatever comes, whatever is, your plans were crushed the moment

I was disqualified! These intentions of yours in the mansion, everything, all of your actions are pointless, meaningless sacrifices! If you understand that, stop this second right now with the stupidity you're pulling!"

Roswaal: "Declined. —Seeing your insufficient resolve, I've come to more keenly understand the necessity. There is absolutely no need for you to be human. I'll corner you, wound you, make you so dependant on Emilia-sama that you shed and lose your humanity. I'll make Emilia-sama, too, a being that needs you as she drowns in an entirely dependant love. I'll travel the path where you sink in a relationship of needing only each other as you mindlessly drown. That is the single and only pathway to realising my goal."

Subaru: "Wh, at is the point in any of that! No amount of whittling me down will make those missing qualifications come back! It's a vain effort, you're not getting anything from it!"

Roswaal: "You should know best whether that is truly what you believe." Roswaal's frigid voice strikes the shouting Subaru.

The single, strong thud in his heart is because he understands what Roswaal is saying. It's nothing incredible, and in fact simple.

Just as Subaru had figured—if Subaru truly and seriously rethought matters and sought help from Echidna, she would offer him her hand. If he entirely and wholly was caught in a checkmate, and he was content merely to proceed forward, then that method would be available to him.

Roswaal: "Should the being you are return to her, Echidna would gladly reinstate your qualifications or anything else. When you consider her nature that is a natural outcome, and even I can at least understand that much."

Subaru says nothing.

Roswaal: "Hold your conceit, Natsuki Subaru. You are not the only one who

understands Echidna.” Spoken in a diction quite unlike Roswaal, flowing to the brim with hatred and malice.

The intensity of the animosity flung directly at him leads Subaru to stiffen. Digesting the meaning of Roswaal's words, for the first time, Subaru feels he understands Roswaal's goal.

Subaru: “You're putting precedence on SANCTUARY's freedom because... that's Echidna's wish.” Roswaal says nothing.

Subaru: “Having the tomb's TRIALS she designed cleared, having SANCTUARY freed... and that ties into her funerary rites or something, is that how you're thinking?”

Roswaal: “...In life, Echidna worried about how this place would meet its end after her death. With that worry she left the tomb's mechanisms behind, and had her soul lodged there. But even with four hundred years gone, the end she sought hasn't come to this place.”

The barrier surrounding SANCTUARY has not been broken since it was placed four hundred years ago.

The ending that Echidna desired and wished to see still hasn't come. What Roswaal wants is to show that end to Echidna, and give her soul repose?

The idea itself is not beyond Subaru's understanding. While he had never believed in ghosts back in the old world, in this world he had interacted with Echidna and the other witches.

Should it be that the witches still had some attachment to this land, then wanting to grant their wish would evoke a feeling close to gratitude.

But living entirely for that purpose while disregarding everyone else was preposterous.

Subaru: "That story's separate from this one. Roswaal, I'll ready a different chance for Echidna's repose. I can promise that I'll endeavour my best for that. —So pull back from the mansion."

Roswaal: "Declined. I am going to fulfil my desire and Echidna's wish. I'll take the measures I require. I'll ruin all those I need to, wound you, be the villain."

Subaru: "Stop dragging others into your own self-satisfactions! If there's something you wanna pull her out and tell her, goddamn do it yourself! Don't make sacrifices of someone trying to create a future, a child who still has her future, and a girl withdrawn who can't believe in the future!"

There is no need for Frederica, Petra, Beatrice to be sacrificed to this plan.

Neither is there reason to entertain Roswaal's complacency, especially when the reason for it has nothing to do with the humanity of the girls, and is instead to wound Subaru.

Roswaal: "Declined. The only offer I'll heed is I'LL DO EVERYTHING EXACTLY AS ROSWAAL SAYS TO. Everything but that I will reject. Their sacrifices are inevitable."

Subaru: "Fuck off. I'm fine with revealing just what you're plotting and what the results of it'll be."

Roswaal: "Or rather, you stop acting without consideration to consequences. What is the purpose in doing that? Making public my misdeeds will change not a single thing about the situation around SANCTUARY. Emilia-sama loses her backer for the Royal Selection, and relations with the evacuees and the

SANCTUARY dwellers unmistakably worsen. Do you believe Emilia-sama can challenge the TRIAL to produce results with an emnity-laden bomb at her back? How many times now have you seen Emilia-sama crumble?"

Subaru: "I-if, Garfiel learns Frederica... that his sister was sacrificed for your plan, you won't be getting off cheap..."

Roswaal: "If you're putting your hopes in that thing, then your discernment truly is lacking. There will never be any such thing of Garfiel exiting SANCTUARY to rush in aiding Frederica. Prisoner to non-existent terrors of what may happen to SANCTUARY in his absence, petrified, is the sad and foolish existence called Garfiel. His perspective is narrow, he is stubborn, and despite it he still manages to have brute strength and only brute strength. For how wanting his intelligence is, his thoughts would regardless figure the risk in what would happen to SANCTUARY should I be gone. — Because he is capable of nothing but protecting his weak and brittle world, and a desperate child."

A desperate child, is the descriptor which stabs Subaru in the chest.

That was the same opinion the witches had passed on Subaru, as he attempted to make a sacrifice of himself. Apparently, Roswaal views Garfiel in an identical fashion.

Unaware of this, or perhaps even aware of it, Garfiel must have wholeheartedly persevered in his goals.

Roswaal: "Garfiel will not ally with you. I have no intention to stop in my plans. All you need to do is have circumstances beyond your ability degrade your heart, polish it, and perfect it. Anything more is unnecessary. Accept this rationalization, Natsuki Subaru. —Accept that the death of anyone but Emilia-sama means nothing."

Subaru: "Just fucking stop! I! Am never going to be like you! Someone like you, thoughts like yours... I'm never gonna have them! That isn't how a human being thinks!"

Roswaal says nothing.

Subaru: "I am human. No matter what weird, incomprehensible power I get given, no matter how much pain and suffering I experience, that isn't changing. —I am human. And I'm going to keep being human."

Subaru backs off to put distance between himself and Roswaal. For a single instant some complex emotion run across his noble face, but he immediately shrugs.

Roswaal: "Weeeeeell, doesn't bother me. So long as you have infinite opportunities, then it is the same case for me. For this attempt we'll have me give up oooooooon persuading you. I'll be leaving it to the next me."

Subaru: "Saying that this attempt didn't work... supposing it's the next time, or the time after that, I am still never going to agree with your proposals. I won't be like you."

Roswaal: "—Leave the room. Living in this life no longer has meaning."

Returning to the bed, Roswaal leaves Subaru with only this as he diverts his attention away. He closes his eyes in an attempt to sleep, indeed rejecting any parley with Subaru.

Subaru goes to open his mouth to address Roswaal's attitude, but finding no

words, Subaru: “—”

Subaru silently leaves the room, feeling himself the defeated.

* * * * *

Exiting Roswaal's sleeping place, Subaru wanders beneath the moonlight.
Subaru: “—What should I do?”

This question out his mouth is directed at an impenetrable problem, spoken with the exact same phrasing had repeated and repeated and repeated in his head, but the answer comes back to him like no echo.

His question reaches nobody, disappearing into nothingness as vacancy alone lies heavy in his throat.

All there is to call this is deadlocked.

Neither Roswaal nor Echidna seem likely sources of help any more.

Collaborating with Echidna was physically, and collaborating with Roswaal was sentimentally, impossible.

Subaru had conceived of this possibility.

That perhaps Roswaal was Elsa's employer, and had had her attack the mansion for the sake of Emilia's—though really aimed at Subaru in this case—TRIAL.

Elsa seemed to appear according to when Subaru arrived at the mansion. Then was the death of potential-instigator Frederica, and Elsa's knowledge of the hidden passage and Beatrice's Forbidden Archive. If he aligned everything and considered it, the only likely suspects remaining were Ram or Roswaal.

Ram with her utter adoration of Roswaal had no need to do anything

disadvantageous to him, so by process of elimination only Roswaal is left. — That said, this possibility was one he avoided thinking about outside a crevice of his mind, more due to the sense of 'it can't be like this', than not wanting it to be like this.

Subaru: "If Elsa's employer is Roswaal, then..."

The theft of Emilia's insignia in the Capital on the first day of Subaru's summons here may have also been due to Roswaal.

Should the gospel have written beforehand of the appearance of Subaru—of a presence possessing the authority to RETURN BY DEATH—and that this presence was needed for Emilia's victory, the ruckus that day would have then been necessary to drag Subaru in as an ally.

His frantic efforts that day, his three deaths in saving Emilia, his asking of Emilia's name alongside her smile, had all been playing into Roswaal's hands.

Subaru: "He knew all of everything beforehand... then you're saying Rem's existence getting stolen, and this deadlock in SANCTUARY, all of it is according to someone's plan?"

If so, then even Subaru's frantic will to do something was simply playing along on the strings that somebody was controlling.

Was the fundamental answer only to throw away everything except Emilia and proceed forward? Was this present situation where he was unable to do that really nothing more than a stalemate?

Subaru: "Am I stupid? ...No, I am stupid. It's this stuck-still brainless thinking

which's how you probably get Roswaal... what am I gonna do if even I get sucked in..."

The one who understood best that gospels were not absolute was Subaru, who had overwritten the events dictated in Betelgeux's gospel.

The writ of the future-instructing gospels is not infallible. In situations where events differing from the writ occurred, Roswaal would give up on the world, flinging his hopes over for the next atte—

Subaru: “—huh?”

Right now, just then, he hit on something peculiar.

While thinking carefully about Roswaal's gospel and going over events in sequence, Subaru definitely hit on something awry. But what it was exactly was taking no comprehensible form.

Subaru: “What? What... something's strange. But, what is it!?”

As if sprung with a puzzle with no visible answer, Subaru searches through the mist for the light. Roswaal's gospel. Acting according to the writ. Beatrice's gospel. The Witch Cult GOSPELS. Prophecies which told nothing after their owner's deaths. Blank pages. Results according to prophecy. Results not according to prophecy. —The present, deviating from the writ.

Subaru: “No luck. —It's one step away, but not coming.”

While sensing that he's pieced some portions of the scattered puzzle together, it fails to tie into concrete form before dispersing. But this tug was one he must not overlook.

In the stalemates he had been thus far, he would always wrest the answer out from smaller clues, open a pathway and escape.

It was the same now, as these fragments bit-by-bit surely tied to the answer, and—

???: “—Subaru?”

Subaru: “Weh?”

The call of his name drags Subaru's attention out from his sea of thought.

Subaru breaks his face from the water's surface, to find himself amid a dusk lit by a downpour of moonlight, and Emilia gazing at him with her silver hair glimmering.

Subaru: “Oh, Emilia... -tan. What're you doing here. Pretty late out, y'know?”

Emilia: “But that's the same for you too, Subaru. If you stay up too late, you won't grow any taller.” Subaru: “I think I've about finished puberty, so not super worried about that...”

Emilia comes in with a topic diverging a little from the point as always. Regaining some of his calm thanks to her reply, Subaru's feet naturally take him over to Emilia's side.

This was in the middle of SANCTUARY, something of an open plaza. Leaning herself against a stone-made, moss-grown, dried-out fountain-looking thing, Emilia's silver hair sways in the night wind as she glances at the Subaru beside her.

Seeing an allure in her gloomy amethyst eyes brings sweet, achy impulse to his downcast heart. Emilia: "I couldn't get to sleep, so I kinda went out for a walk... what happened with you, Subaru?"

Subaru: "...Nope, same thing for me. I'm the type where I can't really get to sleep if you swap out my pillow, and also Otto snores surprisingly loud."

Emilia: "It's sooo surprising that you've got that daintiness."

Emilia gives a quiet laugh as she puts her hand to her mouth. Gazing at her from aside, Subaru reflects on this being the night that he RETURNED BY DEATH, and the first time he has reunited with Emilia.

In the places with no connection to Subaru, fundamentally people's actions follow a generally set path despite the loops. Meaning that Emilia would without fail come out here for a walk on the night of her first day challenging the TRIAL, unable to sleep.

Invited to the tea party, had Garfiel threaten him, learned about the Lewes facility deep in the woods, learned that Roswaal is the mastermind, during all the time that Subaru has been pulling these stunts, Emilia's been faced with changes too.

Emilia: "...You seem down, Subaru." Subaru: "I, guess. Not trying to be though."

Emilia: "Not really, that's a lie. If you were the usual Subaru, you'd be more... zany?" Subaru: "Who says zany any more?"

Been a while since we've done those lines, thinks Subaru as his cheeks loosen in relief. Emilia

points at Subaru's cheeks, smiling,

Emilia: "There, you smiled. Subaru, you're always trying to show me your smiles, but right now you couldn't do it."

Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "Did something... painful happen? If you're worried about something... if you don't mind it being me, I'll listen."

Having the relaxing of his once-tense cheeks pointed out and words of concern flung at him, Subaru frantically withstands the heat building up beneath his eyelids.

Her kind, compassionate words permeate his body. In this deadlocked, unworkable situation where even the glimmer of hope he saw is lost, he could almost wind up clinging to this darling hand kindly presented to him.

He can't stick through with the will he had resolved himself to just a little while ago. His wavering conviction is pathetic, frustrating.

Subaru: "It's... this's my problem. I can't pull anything that'd put a burden on you, Emilia." Emilia says nothing.

Subaru: "You're having a way harder time than me, yeah? The TRIAL messed you up that much... erm, are you feeling better now?"

Emilia: "Right, I have caused you very much trouble. I'm sorry for the unsightly fuss. ...I think I ran into a problem I wasn't mentally ready for at all."

Subaru looks away as he changes the topic. Emilia gives a powerless, breathy smile. She leans back against the fountain, looking up at the night sky to avert her gaze.

Emilia: "Really... I have to think I wasn't prepared for it at all. That I've gotten this far by running away from so many things I have to face."

Subaru: "I don't really think that's a bad thing though. What's so wrong about running from things you don't like? Does continually facing things you don't like mean eventually you'll be able to beat them? Are you obligated to beat them? If there where you run you find a disparate path, and decide to go down that road... is that something people have to fault you for?"

Emilia: "Subaru?"

Emilia scrunches her pretty eyebrows as Subaru lets his tongue keep slipping, talking quickly and with no real summation of what he's trying to say. Although Emilia is confused, Subaru continues without noticing her reaction.

Subaru: "Echidna who put the TRIAL in the tomb, Roswaal who dragged us in here knowing the TRIAL was there, Garfiel who knows we have to overcome it but's getting in the way, anyone and everyone they're all just goddamn selfish. You all go doing whatever the hell you like, addressing us

however the hell you like, and why do we have to be tossed around by that? And if we try doing things our own way they bitch that we're not doing it how they wanted... hell are we meant to do here."

Emilia: "—"

Subaru: "My head could burst, I feel I could go crazy. It's just more and more and more and more the problems keep piling up into this mountain... and to top

it off, the reason for it's me, just fuck off. Just fuck off. Just fuck—"

It happens the moment that his emotions seethe, when his incomprehensible indignation starts making him dizzy.

Soft hands loop around to the back of his head, his body pulled down with a tug. His head thrusts into the softness directly before him, his breath unwittingly catching.

Subaru's head is buried in a terribly hot, tender touch.

Hearing the thudding of a heartbeat beyond the warmth of their touch, his blank mind slowly is forced to recognize the reality—that he is being cradled to Emilia's breast.

Subaru: "Ah, auh?"

Emilia: "Take it slow. Quietly now. Take it slowly, listen to the sound of my heart." Subaru: "—Mm."

Emilia: "Leave yourself to my steady heartbeat, quietly take a breath in, out... in, out, repeat. Once you're calm, tap me on the back. We can stay like this until then."

His spine tingling with pleasure at the whisper to his ear, Subaru's breathing involuntarily accelerates. While the shock blasted away his high-strung emotions, now he is tormented by the sense that all of the blood in his body is boiling hot.

How and why did he plummet into this situation? While he listens to Emilia's quiet pulse, his own heart strikes against his ribs in an entirely disparate, violent rhythm.

But even his clamorous pulse is undone by Emilia's breathing and her soft

palm stroking his head, the beat naturally slowing down. He takes deeps breaths just as instructed, repeated inhales and exhales, putting his breath and heart in order.

Quietly, he taps Emilia's back. The hand at his head moves away at the signal, Subaru uprighting himself as he withstands his reluctance to part.

Emilia: "Calmed down?" Subaru: "...Somehow."

Faced with the gleam of amethyst before him, Subaru gives a small sigh.

A relieved smile arises on Emilia's face. Enduring the awkwardness threatening to make him blush, Subaru gives a small shake of the head.

Subaru: "I'm sorry for flipping out. I didn't even want to cause you problems like that."

Emilia: "I don't think they're problems at all."

Subaru: "But you have to be having a much harder time than me, Emilia. That's the truth. If I could, I'd want to save you from suffering this... is what I'd thought."

Emilia: "Subaru..."

Subaru had a self who wanted to always be a cool Subaru when around Emilia.

While thinking that truthfully he was disgraceful, weak and complacent, never good enough at anything and constantly straining for his absolute best, wanting to be at her side.

Subaru: "Just nothing ever goes well, I really am... I just had a talk with Roswaal. To see if there's some way to get through SANCTUARY without the TRIAL."

Emilia: "Huh?"

Subaru: "The truth is what's best is if I can take the TRIAL as substitute, but... but, I don't think I can any more. And so I was frantically looking for at least maybe there's some sidepath somewhere but even that's difficult too. What should I do... I'm sorry I'm useless."

Emilia: "Subaru—"

He hangs his head. His thoughtless self, unable to find even one single prudent method despite his ability to infinitely do things over, is pathetic.

There were lots of cases where if he had just done better, it would've all ended without creating any sorrowful worlds like the ones he had to see in the second TRIAL.

There had to have been a way for him to do something about this miserable situation—

Subaru: "But I will do something. I will do something so you'll suffer no pain or badness, Emilia. Please believe in me."

Emilia: "...Subaru."

Subaru: "Yeah."

Emilia looks up at Subaru with her eyes teary.

Gazing back at her wetted eyes, his heart jolting, Subaru steels his resolve to ensure the most important parts alone go without distortion.

He protects Emilia, overcomes SANCTUARY, saves the mansion, recovers everything.

There was not a single glimmer of hope he saw on the road ahead, but surely something would— Emilia: “I'm happy you feel this way. I'm truly happy. —But, I can't accept your kindness.”

—When the resolve he had supposedly steeled is, from the mouth of the darling girl and the strong conviction in her eyes, flat-out rejected.

Chapter 85: Using Words, Using Feelings, Using Fists

Subaru: “—Wha?”

Unable for a moment to comprehend what he has just been told, Subaru voices a noise of astonishment.

His eyes widen, his mouth gapes open. Emilia gazes at him as she puts her thoughts to form.

Emilia: “It makes me so happy that you think like that about me, that you're saying this for me, taking action for me. It's so, so trustworthy, and I rely on you so, so much. ...But this thing where you're trying to find an escape route is a No.”

Subaru: “N-No... about this, one-way coercion!?”

Emilia: “I'm who decided to challenge. There's somewhere I need to go, a gate I need to go through to get there, and right now I need to work my hardest to travel that. I don't want to make any excuses.”

Subaru is stricken, faced with an Emilia whose eyes host determination and lips are pursed firm. Her resolute face abounds with strong-willed brilliance. This was not the visage of a weak girl, who could not walk her path without Subaru's hand pull her along.

Why, and how come? With his heart buried in questions, Subaru shakes his head.

Subaru: “I think your resolve's amazing, Emilia. But your compatibility for this

TRIAL's awful. Going into a fight with no plan when chances of winning are... slim, isn't what I'd call noble."

Emilia: "...Chances of winning really do feel slim."

Emilia smiles wryly at Subaru as he fails to under-represent the situation at all. That her eyebrows droop slightly is because she accepts Subaru's opinion with absolute sincerity.

Subaru feels himself a horribly deficient human being, unable to immediately elect for words of support.

Subaru: "What about at least waiting until I can find some hints? If I could just get the time, I can... I will make more preferable conditions for you. And that'd get you so much more relaxed, and..."

Emilia: "No, you can't, Subaru. I just somehow know. —There's no sideroads or shortcuts for the TRIAL in that tomb."

Subaru falls silent.

Emilia: "It's strange though. I just know it. Even if we take time, unless I'm steadily ready and prepared to challenge, the results will always be the same. I know that."

Subaru: "Au..."

No words to refute her are coming.

While he doesn't know the exact details of the TRIAL, Subaru does agree with

Emilia about these rules she has perceived.

Repeated challenges of the TRIAL will not soften or intensify its contents or nature. The same conditions and same subjects will welcome the challengers. The TRIAL would go without any change to its properties, producing different results only according to the heart of the challenger— as was likely to Echidna's taste.

Emilia: "Say, Subaru. —Why are you trying to help me?" Subaru: "—"

This query was one which had also held incredible significance the last time it was asked.

How much time had Subaru spent in desperation to report to her the answer? How much hardship had he overcome to communicate it to Emilia?

And so he can answer her clearly, without any hesitation.

Subaru: "I want to help you because I like you. —Because I love all of you."

Emilia: "—Mm. Yeah, I know. You love me, Subaru."

Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "It makes me sooo happy you feel that way. You're sooo trustworthy. I'm relying on you sooo much. Just by having you watching me like this, I know I can try sooo hard."

Hand to her chest, her cheeks reddening slightly, Emilia closes her eyes. She continues, her words packed with incredible emotion.

Emilia: "And so,"

Emilia: "Don't get stuck thinking that you have to do something. I can do my

best just by having you watching me. If you want to do something, if you'll follow with my conceits, then I want you by my side. I want you to support me."

Subaru: "Emilia..."

Emilia: "If there's a hand to support my back when I'm faltering, I know I can stand back up. I want you to be there for me when I'm wavering, Subaru."

Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "For trying to always walk ahead of me, move away the stones so I don't trip, smooth out the path, cut back the weeds, and guide me by the hand, thank you. But if it's that you're always doing things for me, I know I'm going to impose entirely on you. Because my core nature's slapdash."

Subaru: "Who says, sl... ap,"

Subaru attempts his usual line, but the words won't come.

He cannot restrain the emotions swelling in his chest. This indescribable, nigh-incomprehensible feeling was what, exactly? To keep from losing it as it strongly asserts its existence, Subaru grits his teeth as he continues facing Emilia.

Emilia: "I've imposed, imposed, entirely imposed... and so this time I want to try things without doing that. It does unease me that with every failure, I'm making you and everyone worry, but... I'll do things so that doesn't happen, so I can finish it even a day earlier."

A small but hearty smile rises on Emilia's face.

Emilia: "Please be at my side, watching over my efforts, as I work my best. — That is my wish for you, Subaru."

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Subaru: "—hk!!"

He slices the wind. With his legs still in haste, his heart still in animation.

He soars as he dashes over sloped land with its poor footholds, branches cutting grazes across his cheeks, tripping countless times yet nevertheless running so long as he breathes.

Subaru: "—!"

Yelling a mute yell, practically demanding his throat to burst, staring up at the night sky through the gaps in the thick foliage, gazing at the glittering moon and glimmering stars, Subaru screams.

—He wished this way to spew out his foolish foolishness, turn everything in him to empty.

—Seared into his memories is Emilia's closing smile, and the strong determination in her eyes.

That smile, her resolve, and Subaru's misunderstanding. He finally understood that the impulse swelling hot from inside him, nigh scorching his heart, was a combination of the three.

Because he realised the identity of the impulse, unable to stay another second, Subaru launched impulsively into the forest immediately after parting with Emilia to run around the woods like an animal.

Not permitting he stand still, not even allowing him to escape into sleep, combustive emotion flares in him every time he remembers Emilia—the emotion being what humans called SHAME.

Shame dominates all of Subaru, permitting him to stop not at all. Subaru: “I... I...!”

Overwhelming idiot. Truly, entirely, so foolish it's hopeless, unsalvagable.

When Roswaal had disparaged Emilia by calling her a thing, Subaru had flown into a rage. He bared his teeth, yelling that he would not allow any insults or disdain of her.

Then he immediately met Emilia, revealed all his desires to act for her, was rejected, and first realised.

—The one who put the least faith in Emilia's resolve, determination, and strength, was Subaru.

I have to protect her. I don't want her to feel sadness or pain.

With those thoughts in mind, Subaru had ruminated on distancing Emilia from hardship. Substituting for her and taking the TRIAL, if he couldn't then searching for a byroad which presented no necessity to take the TRIAL, and if even that seemed risky—worst case, if he could just do something about the cause of the time limit on evacuating SANCTUARY which was the Sizeable Hare...—he had agonized entirely over methods to settle everything without Emilia facing the TRIAL.

Despite being that, through all the time that Subaru's complacent and protective wants led him to devise plans to safeguard her, Emilia had during the night in solitude steeled her determination and resolve, and decided to face the TRIAL without running.

Despite being that she was wishing for Subaru to support her in that resolve.

It was no other than Natsuki Subaru who most disparaged the girl called Emilia. Subaru: “—!”

The instant he realised it, an unbearable feeling of shame clobbered Subaru about the head.

Giving Emilia a rather unconvincing reply as she sought for his response, Subaru gave the worried girl a light wave as he left the scene, practically fleeing. His legs ran him into the forest, and here he was.

Subaru's complacency had wounded Emilia like this before, in the Capital.

Paying no mind to Emilia's considerations or resolve, getting arrogant about the authority he had just acquired, unable to communicate the truth behind his selfish behaviours to her, all of it spawned a definitive departure between himself and Emilia.

It was because that happened, because he established his feelings for her, and established how to convey them to her, that Subaru could be where he was now.

—And still, Subaru was again incorrect.

Being wounded in Emilia's place, substituting for Emilia during hardship, crafting a road for Emilia's sake.

While his current methods lacked any bragging to Emilia or showing off to others, and may appear something of an advancement from before—in reality,

the nature of it hadn't changed at all.

He'd just gotten better at hiding his wounds.

He'd just muted the arrogance he had in speaking proudly of his injuries.

Nothing had changed about him screaming that he was correct while imposing his egocentricities on Emilia.

Subaru: "I... I... gha,"

Out of breath and panting, the running Subaru raises his head for a thick branch to strike him in the forehead. Bending backwards in pain, the footing beneath him crumbles as he grips at open space.

Falling to his side, tumbling down the dirty and leaf-covered ground, Subaru comes to lie spread on the earth.

His back lying on the cold ground, Subaru breathes ragged breaths as he gazes at the sky above. Between gaps in the trees, the night peeks through.

In this world void of streetlamps and amid the prickling, clear air, the stars gleam with brilliance. While the full expanse of the glittering night sky looks down at him, with these unfamiliar constellations surrounding him, Subaru dissolves steadily into a vortex of his own smallness, his anxiety for the unclear future, his tangible dread, and his dishevelled emotions.

The exhaustion hits him. He cannot stay conscious.

It had been a tumultuous time. Not only is it the fatigue amassed in his body, but the accumulated mental fatigue that drags Subaru into darkness.

RETURN BY DEATH. Witches' tea party. Roswaal's motives. His arrogant person, and Emilia with the resolve to stand by herself.

Amidst these thoughts, the answer to what Subaru must do is—

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???: "Well ain't you just in enviable straits."

The first thing Subaru perceives as he wakes up is the coldness on his skin, and this voice directed at him.

His eyelids tremble under the chilly sunlight, Subaru scrunches his face as his eyes open. He winds up looking directly at the sun peeking in through the trees, his eyes teary as he attempts to upright himself.

Subaru: "Ghhe, eu, ow..."

His stiff joints clicking, Subaru groans in pain.

The coldness of the ground and air had accordingly stiffened his body as he lay on the hard earth, and every action to unwind his joints comes alongside a dull pain.

???: "Got no damn clue what th'point of it was, but sleepin' in a place which ain't gotta roof ain't somethin' I recommend. 'S a WITH GAURAN IN THE ROOF AND FLOOR, WHAT YOU HAVE IS LIVEABLE."

Subaru: "Gauran are... no, nevermind that..."

Shaking his head, Subaru looks up to the owner of the rowdy voice—Garfiel,

who clicks his fangs as he looks down at the squatting Subaru.

His consciousness sobers into wakefulness at that same instant as Subaru remembers just what situation he's in.

Subaru: "Ri, ght... last night, I fell dead asleep like that..."

Garfiel: "So I go cyclin' round th'place fer my daily routine, smell yer stink comin' from th'forest 'n wonder what's goin' on. And then yer fuckin' spread out on the ground, had me goddamn wonderin' 'f some hasty guy'd gone 'n killed yer overnight."

Subaru: "If the most likely candidate you didn't do it, no one would've. ...What time is it?" Putting his hand to his chin, Subaru shakes his heavy head. Garfiel gives a breathy snort.

Garfiel: "Ain't gotta be all hurried, 's still before breakfast. Only ones gonna be 'wake'r th'earlybird gamps n' grans n' my amazin' self."

Subaru: "Then there's been no fuss about me not coming back. ...Gonna be a pain if I don't get back to the cathedral before then... or no, right now actually..."

Should Subaru not have returned overnight, then suspicion could fall on Otto who returned earlier. And even if that in particular didn't become a problem, Subaru would prefer to avoid any anxiety spreading among the Arlam evacuees. Causing disharmony due to his own carelessness, despite the mountain of problems already there, was the worst of verboten acts.

Garfiel: "...Yer expression's changed from last night again." Subaru: "Hm?"

Clinging to a nearby tree to get himself standing up, Subaru rotates his neck when Garfiel addresses him. Subaru glances back to find him scratching rigorously at his blond hair.

Garfiel: "Not like yesterday where y'couldn't tell f' yer got calm t'yer'r not, right now yer like... face looks like yer fuckin' refreshed."

Subaru: "—"

Garfiel: "Shit, that ain't quite it. Can't fuckin' say it right... oi, fuck're you laughin' at?" Subaru: "Khah, hahahh..."

Subaru puts his hands to his cheeks. Feeling that his mouth is slightly slack, a trembling laugh spews out from the back of the throat.

The low, once-strangled noise grows gradually louder.

Subaru: "Hahahaha! I'm refreshed! Really, that's what I look like?" Garfiel: "Well y'do! Hell's so funny..."

Subaru: "It's the opposite, Garfiel. Completely, entirely, the opposite." Garfiel: "Eh?"

Suppressing the urge to laugh, Subaru jabs his finger toward Garfiel.

Subaru: "I'm not damn refreshed at all. My insides are creaking and cracking and honestly, right now I could burst apart any second. I was denied everything I wanted to attempt, everything I strained myself for backfired... I seriously don't know what to do."

Garfiel: "—"

Subaru: "I figured out I'm really in a deadlock, and it actually makes me just laugh. If everything I tried doing something about was useless... it's from the start again, then."

As he mutters without strength, Subaru's shoulders droop.

If he was mistaken about everything from the very start, then every single he thought he has had since is faulty.

It's the sense of having a time limit steadily creeping in, but belatedly realising that his fundamental equations are entirely wrong. What's another towel-thrower is that he can only consider these problems as ones he won't be taught the solution for.

Garfiel scrunches his nose in hesitation as he deliberates on what to tell the dejected Subaru. Being that Subaru understands that questioning Garfiel will earn him no precise answers, all this amounts to is senseless resentment.

An awkward silence descends upon the two of them—and.

???: "—Should we have me tell you what to do?" Subaru: "—!"

Subaru hurriedly looks up toward the voice raining down from above. Garfiel's manner as he too glances in that direction suggests no surprise, probably because he had already sensed this coming.

Weaving through the gaps in the trees as they approach is, Subaru: "...Otto?"
Otto: "Yes, hello, good morning to you. You're correct, it's me."

With a twig snapping underfoot, Otto wears a somewhat counterfeit smile as he walks over. While his sudden appearance flusters Subaru, Garfiel just clicks his tongue.

Garfiel: "Sayin, my amazin' self only found him a second ago too. Ain't that I forgot 'bout you as we went on havin' our chat."

Otto: "I wasn't suspecting you for anything like that. Just so long as Natsuki-san's been found in no critical condition. —And beside all that, could I request something?"

Garfiel: "...Spit it out."

Otto: "I was wondering if I could be alone with Natsuki-san for a minute. There's something I'd like to discuss with him."

Subaru goes without being able to digest this situation as Otto and Garfiel have their talk, their expressions somewhat pretentious. Garfiel grinds his teeth at Otto's request, glancing over at Subaru.

Garfiel: "Just don't pull anythin' funny." With that, Garfiel leaves the scene.

He treads on the grass, exiting the forest as he returns for SANCTUARY. Watching him off as he remains left behind, Subaru wets his dry lips with his tongue.

Subaru: "Some, time where I didn't notice it, looks like conversation's started working on Garfiel."

Otto: "It's because I've been doing more than nothing during the time you were having your kerfuffle, Natsuki-san. Some deepening of relations between the people from here and the evacuees... well, none of that really matters right now."

Answering sincerely to Subaru's question, Otto cuts off the conversation with a flick of his hand, his stare landing on Subaru. Or no, that was far too intense a gaze to be a stare. That was the intensity more belonging to a glare.

Subaru: "Well, what..."

Discomforted by the gaze, Subaru muddies his words as he speaks weakly. Otto gives a small sigh.

Otto: "Although vaguely, I did hear the situation. It sounds like you've been very cornered, Natsuki-san, by many things."

Subaru: "—"

Otto: "I've been kept out of the loop, though, so naturally I don't know the particulars. But surely you're at your limit? At least to the point where I'm hearing blubbering about what to do."

Subaru: "Well, what do I do? ...You said you had an idea."

Listening to the somewhat unsparing Otto, Subaru alludes to his first statement from when he cut into the conversation.

Otto had indeed cut into the silence between Subaru and Garfiel with such a remark. What did those words truly mean?

Subaru: "You're saying you know what to..." Otto: "Yes, I do know. It's all very simple." Subaru: "Simple..."

Otto: "Do you want to know it?"

This manner of speech is an annoying one.

He'd agonized over his troubles extensively, and was in hardly any presentable state. Otto's speaking was nothing other than something to irritate such a listener.

Subaru: "I-it's goddamn obvious that I do! Stop pissing around! If there's something you know, then just..."

Otto: "Well then, you must prepare." Subaru: "P-prepare?"

Otto: "Yes. First take a long, deep breath..."

Presenting his hands out to Subaru, Otto couples his statements with instructive gestures showing him to breathe deeply. Although not really understanding the significance, Subaru obeys the instructions as he composes his breathing, closes his eyes, lets his lungs inflate—

Subaru: "—!?"

That instant, a sharp whack strikes across Subaru's face, sending him toppling down to the ground. He fails to catch himself as he tumbles, face to the dirt as he disorients. He shakes his head, looks around the area while confused as to what happened, catches the sight of Otto with his fist raised, and realises that he's been punched.

Subaru swallows his breath. Fist clenched and reddening, Otto speaks. Otto: "Do not dare wear pretensions when among friends, Natsuki Subaru."

Chapter 86: With Disregard To Chances Of Success

The event astonishes Subaru so much that he forgets the pain of being punched.

Subaru raises his head as he lies toppled on the ground, Otto glaring at him. Upon that normally pitiable, blank-smile-wearing, assuredly-not-intensely-emotional-in-the-least expression are eyes harbouring a definite and blazing fury.

Otto Swein's eyes host rage as he looks down on Subaru.

Otto: "You don't know what to do, and your head's jumbled up." Subaru: "—"

Otto: "Always whenever you need help, with your own skills and smarts and strengths insufficient, you fight desperately running and running and running around, accomplishing only the passage of time."

Otto step-by-step closes distance on the silent Subaru.

Hands and feet to the ground and unable to move, grimacing as the heat of his left cheek only now starts asserting itself, all Subaru can do is stare at Otto.

Otto: "Silence means no denials, and so affirmation. In our world it's the lowest of deeds, liable only for suckering. Are you listening to me?"

Otto reaches out to the wordless Subaru, grabs his collar, hoists him up. Otto: "If you're listening, then speak to me!"

Subaru: "—!"

A sharp, hard impact strikes Subaru in the forehead. His vision dances with

fireworks.

The disoriented Subaru realises that he has just eaten a headbutt from Otto. One more headbutt once again from Otto sends the dazed Subaru pitching back.

Pain to his brow, pain to his cheek, shoved backwards and stumbling is Subaru. Not even he could go without saying something when all this has been done to him, and—

Subaru: “Fuck're, you doing...”

Otto: “Oho, so for all the punches and damage you really were still conscious. I was nigh-certain I had just practised some pathetic violence upon a sleeping man.”

Subaru: “Hell'dy—!?”

In tears from the second headbutt which struck him in the nose, Subaru leaves himself to rage as he reaches to grab Otto. But Otto slips aside the outstretched arm, evading it, instead violently sweeping Subaru's legs out from under him—knocking him down.

Subaru: “Ghhah!?”

Otto: “Just when your head has some proper activity to it, now it's your footing that's unattended. Isn't this exactly what your activities are, pathetic.”

Subaru: “Rea... lly, now!”

Springing up to his feet, Subaru throws the fistful of dirt he grasped during the fall at Otto's face. But having read the movement, Otto guards his face with his arm. Subaru's shock at having his blinding attempt seen though makes him slow to take action when Otto swiftly approaches. He grabs the rear of Subaru's collar as he slams his fist into his stomach, hurling him away.

Slamming to the ground back-first, ricocheting off the earth, the shock and the pain halt Subaru's breathing.

While he had been tossed to a spot with heavy pilings of fallen leaves, that did not mean they absorbed the entirety of the impact.

With numbness running all the way down to his toes, the gasping Subaru cannot stand up.

Otto: "Well I'd suppose we'd call the attempt at slyness typical of you, Natsuki-san. Although it didn't work against me, who had been anticipating it."

Subaru: "...khh, ghhau,"

Otto: "See, Natsuki-san. This is what your strength amounts to. You'll never achieve to the level of the Knights, or Roswaal-sama, or especially not Garfiel. Even against me, here is what you have."

Otto shakes his head in astonishment, his words piercing Subaru as he frantically parcels oxygen into his convulsing lungs.

Otto walks over to the side of Subaru—who is without capacity to voice rebuttal—where he squats down, and draws his face near.

Otto: "Picking fights with the White Whale and the Witch Cult is ridiculous.

You're weak, and the best you can manage in a straight fight is being snapped dead by a single finger. You surely understand this."

Subaru: "—"

Otto: "So, do you mean to compensate for your lack of strength with wits? From what I've seen, you do look to have a wiliness to you, but... assuredly no decision-making ability or intelligence notably above average. Even your common knowledge is lacking."

Irritation comes interspersed with ragged breaths as Subaru fails to understand what Otto is trying to say.

The convulsing of his lungs, shock of being punched, and pain to his brow and cheek have slightly faded. Instead what comes alongside his returned calm is a lack of understanding behind the intention of Otto's piling words.

Otto: "Your strength and wits are lacking, so if we're to assume you have something else to compensate for this... well, there isn't really anything. You're small, your reach is short, you are the

kind of person you could find anywhere. That kind of person, and yet you still desire incredibly for disproportionately great things."

Subaru: "Wh-at've... you been, saying, this whole?"

Otto: "You know you're lacking and incapable, and so what do you come up with as your secondary plan, well it's to corner yourself further, whittling yourself down in an attempt to withdraw something that isn't there... I finally understand how Patrasche-chan felt."

Subaru: "Patrasche?"

Subaru's eyes widen in surprise.

Patrasche. That black dragon was a steed wasted on Subaru, who had even gotten herself wounded to save her master from a terrible dilemma, a benefactor who had taught him an important lesson.

Otto sticks his fingers in his grey hair, his voice annoyed, and barbed. Otto: "So, here you see,"

Otto: "Wearing pretensions around the girl you love is plenty well enough. I think that a necessary pretence, and will respect that. That you'd want to speak of words and things which don't match to your calibre is I suppose inevitable. That much I will overlook."

Emilia. Subaru's attitude, toward Emilia.

Otto: "And I'll pardon you wearing pretensions for the girl who loves you. Again it's necessary. In a relationship of liking to loving, I believe the loved too carries a responsibility. Showing off with pretensions for the sake of who loves you is important. I will pardon it."

Rem. Once, Subaru had told Otto this exact same thing. That he was showing off around Rem. Because she loves him.

Otto: "But you see, that's where you stop." Otto juts his face closer.

Subaru shrinks up his shoulders in anticipation of another headbutt. Practically snarling, Otto,

Otto: "You know that you're lacking. You know that you're incapable. You want to show off to the girl you like. You want to be someone that the girl who likes you can boast about."

Subaru: "—"

Otto: "So then, if it's just to compensate for the things invisible to these girls, to these people, then how about enlisting some help? —Say, from a friend?"

Pulling his face away, Otto communicates his final statement with his palm placed to his chest. Subaru gives a tiny sigh.

Subaru honestly had conceived this.

He assuredly had considered clinging, relying on somebody in that fashion. Of course he had. Otto was exactly correct—Subaru was aware that he was weak and lacking. He was not conceited enough, and did not appraise himself kindly enough, to regard himself capable of absolutely everything on his own.

Had he not made efforts, seeking Echidna and Roswaal's collaboration to compensate for the things he lacked?

And what happened was that far from gaining their cooperation, he learned truths he didn't want to know and was wounded further.

He had already attempted this solution of Otto's. Otto's complaints were misdirected. This route had already been closed off.

Subaru: "—Hah."

Otto: "Is there something so funny?"

With his heart reaching this dry conclusion, the same dryness take shape in his cheeks. Seeing Otto scrunch his brows in discomfort, Subaru's red and swelling face catches Otto in its perception.

Subaru: "Your misaimed ideas are wrong. ...It's not that I haven't relied on anyone. I've already tried everything I could think of that might work. ...I tried relying on those who I trusted I could, and then..."

His hopes betrayed, but nevertheless unable to surrender, himself left with only clueless frustration. And to top it off Emilia rejected his ideas of needing to save and protect her, and he realised that he had been belittling Emilia as A WEAK PERSON WHO NEEDS MY PROTECTION.

Having experienced many things, met many people, said flashy lines, barked that he would do something, rejected resolve to die and instead resolved to live, presented himself as having moved on somewhat, ultimately Subaru had not moved even a single step backwards or forwards.

He could not find a single means to alter this deadlock.

Depleted even of dry smiles, Subaru's cheeks cover with a cold, stiff expression. Otto's lips quiver at Subaru's silent bewailing.

Otto: "...But, Natsuki-san, I don't recollect you ever relying on me yet."
Subaru: "—"

Otto: "I don't merit relying upon, or it'd be pointless... that's the fashion you've dismissed me. Or otherwise, from your perspective... I give the impression that you have to protect me, a target."

That he attempts to suppress the emotion in his shaking voice conversely makes the emotion cacophonous.

This was a glimpse of Otto's rage, sorrow, of intense emotions lacking any outlet. Touched by the wake of Otto's overflowing emotion, Subaru realises that his words have unintentionally hurt him, and he immediately shakes his head.

Subaru: "No, wrong."

Otto: "Well, what am I wrong about? It'd be strange if I was wrong. If I was, then what reason is there for you to shrink back by yourself without saying anything?"

Subaru: "That I didn't... communicate you anything, wasn't because I didn't trust you. You're wrong about that."

Otto: "—"

Shaking his head, Subaru's gaze wanders about as Otto says nothing. His green eyes simply stare, fixedly at Subaru.

Overwhelmed by the gaze and so lowering his eyes, Subaru muddies his words as he puts his hand to his forehead.

It wasn't that he didn't have faith in Otto. Otto had staked his life to protect Subaru during these loops, and Subaru was sincerely grateful for his niceness in associating with him in this money-unrelated situation. That he considered him a friend was not a lie.

But how to reveal the truth of his situation to Otto?

If only he were like Echidna or Roswaal, people to whom Subaru's situation would communicate. While he may have to evade any statements that would trigger the taboo, Subaru could at least manage conversation about it with them.

But not Otto. Otto is not that. Not Emilia, nor Ram, nor the other main players in SANCTUARY knew a single thing about Subaru's situation.

Subaru cannot explain the predicament he's in without mentioning the witches and RETURN BY DEATH. Even should he communicate what will happen, and that there were attacks coming from the Sizeable Hare and on the mansion, he could not in the slightest demonstrate how he attained that information or on what basis he claimed it.

What should he say in this situation to get someone to believe him? Could he even hope for such a thing?

He knew he wasn't strong enough, wasn't smart enough, and was weak.

And so ultimately Subaru needed to gain the aid of others to achieve his wishes. His role was to construct the route to attain those necessary collaborators.

But he failed to fulfil that necessary role, and come to a standstill.

Subaru: "I can't explain any of it well. My head's a mess... you were right, it's a complete jumble and nothing is... no explanation I give can be logical."

Otto says nothing.

Subaru: "It's all entirely stuff where you wouldn't believe it even if I told you..."

just how to talk about it... and so it's, not to you or anybody, nothing..."

Otto: "...Please try saying it." Subaru: "—Whuh?"

Subaru reflexively raises his head. Otto looks down at him, arms crossed.

Otto: "I said, please try saying it. Even if it's illogical, stuttering and disorderly, and your head's such a mess that you can't tell it coherently, I'll listen to the end without any quits."

Subaru: "No, but, that..."

Otto: "There... that! I told you to stop with that pretension!" Yells Otto as he kicks at the ground, entirely out of patience.

Subaru's eyes widen at the abrupt shouting. Otto jabs his finger at him.

Otto: "If you've got the time to brood over these annoying points of lacking evidence to prompt trust, or lacking any basis of believability, or being unable to speak according to logic, then don't you think spewing and confessing everything in your head to be far more constructive than shrinking back!"

Subaru: "But even, saying that... I! I don't, for making you believe this mishmash..."

Otto: "—State the mishmash! Then all you have to do is yell BELIEVE ME! at the end! Because we're friends!"

—The insides of his head, and all of the cluttered and tangled emotions in him, feel to have been blast away by Otto's scream.

Otto's statements are quite lacking in any real basis, and logically speaking have not a speck of persuasiveness to them.

Nevertheless, they are more than enough to give a push to the back of a motionless and stuck Subaru.

Subaru: "You might, not be able to believe all this, but..."

It does not take him that much time to voice the problems he had harboured in solitude.

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Subaru: "And from there, Roswaal's gotten a hit man to attack the mansion... and there he's trying to corner me and Emilia so we have nowhere to run... basically."

While terrified of the arm's potential appearance and paying utmost caution to it, Subaru finishes explaining his situation.

Otto had silently listened to Subaru the entire time without any interjection, his brow crinkled.

Subaru: "The information I've got right now's... or I mean it's really not that exact, but anyway that's all of it. Hiding nothing, all of it."

The stuff about the witches' tea party and RETURN BY DEATH is of course not included.

Since his speech was entirely devoid of that stuff, his story definitely sits on

patchy bases. To the point that even he himself had started feeling sick while talking, with how weak the links between his information was.

He is on edge for what Otto's reaction will be. How would the Otto who asserted 'you just have to add a Believe Me! on the end' judge this story?

Otto: "Natsuki-san..."

Subaru says nothing.

Following a long silence, Otto unfolds his arms as he looks at Subaru. Seeing himself reflected in Otto's green eyes, Subaru unwittingly swallows his breath.

What would Otto's first statement be? The beat of his heart thumps with horrific noise. To the tense Subaru, Otto speaks.

Otto: "There's no way I can pretend I didn't hear this and run away now, is there?" Subaru: "Wha—ahhuh!?"

Subaru yelps as he gets this extraordinary off-kilter reply. But Otto yells over Subaru's surprise. Otto: "After all!"

Otto: "We're trapped in a place with the Sizeable Hare approaching, to escape we have to rely on Emilia and her questionable capabilities of defeating the TRIAL, if we at least try to evacuate the people who won't trigger the barrier we get impeded by Mr. Clueless, and if we do reach the mansion we'll find that an assassin is visiting on the Lord of the Manor's orders... just what is this situation!?"

Subaru: "That's what I wanna know!! Why do I have to be herded into this stupid, ridiculous thing! I mean I already knew it, but does God just actually hate me! Well I hate him too!!"

Supposing there existed a God of Fate, then unmistakably that god hated Subaru. The idea that they weren't trying to do anything detestable was absurd.

But cursing the god for it would not bring any advancement or backpedalling or change or difficulty drops to this situation. And before getting to all that,

Subaru: "Hold on, Otto. I mean I get wanting to flip out like that, but... you believe this insane, no-grounds story?"

Otto: "—"

Subaru: "A super-annoying witchbeast's closing in, we need Emilia for escaping, Garfiel'll interrupt everyone's escape, Roswaal's fucking double-crossing us thanks to his whatever-the-hell ideas.... you believe this story?"

Saying it himself, it really sounds like an aggregation of inconvenient situations.

The big problems are the parts about the Hare's attack and Roswaal being the mastermind behind the assault on the mansion, which lack any explanatory bases. Those two are the ones which are life-threatening, and Subaru entirely lacks any evidence to persuade others into believing them.

How did you divine potents of the coming Sizeable Hare, a piece of information that anyone in the world would want?

How could Roswaal be operating in plots that would disadvantage Emilia, his ally in the Royal Selection?

Subaru could give no explanation for either. Otto: "Natsuki-san."

After a period of silence with his eyes closed, Otto answers Subaru's question. He raises a finger.

Otto: "Up until now, I've ventured around quite a few locales, and although I may be me I have had interactions with rather many people."

Subaru: "...Can tell if someone's trustworthy by looking in their eyes, or something?"

Otto: "No, I don't adhere to that superstition. When you're a merchant, you'll come to learn very well over your experiences that people are beings who can deceive and ruin others without any fog in their gaze at all. I do have some amount of experience with that."

Although bragging about it, wouldn't this mean he's been tricked enough times to be able to? Unable to throw in the teasing when it's partway through an important discussion, Subaru keeps his mouth shut as Otto continues.

Otto: "So there's how I met various people, and did my breed of business negotiations. It's been about four years since I left my home to begin merchanting, and although through both good and bad I've managed to survive."

While Otto's tone as he speaks about it is rather light, most likely the time was not an easy one for him.

He must have been in countless life-or-death situations.

This was a world where just crossing a meadow had one liable to encounter the White Whale, and so Subaru could imagine the various perils a travelling merchant would face. Wild dogs, robbers, those kinds of threats too.

Otto: "Through those days I lived as a decent merchant... And I'm confident that I have always opted for the choices I could calculate as more likely being

the successful. That didn't mean they always produced results, but... or really, it was more that the side I had thought the winner would afterwards be an incredible disaster, and so there were no results..."

Subaru: "Hey..."

Otto: "Leaving aside whether the outcomes were good or bad, I've intended to pick my choices in a way where I would not regret the decision itself. Since I believe it necessary to know clearly what it is I'm staking, and what it is I'm wagering."

While Subaru can't tell just what Otto's criteria for making choices is based upon, he can at least figure that he has always elected for the option which his calculations found more probable as being successful.

That he accompanied Subaru to SANCTUARY, seeking to make connection with Roswaal, was entirely because he wanted to leave an impression on Roswaal, considering what effects that would have for his future. On that front Otto behaved very well as a realist.

And so Subaru's thoughts were that Otto heeding his words, baseless and without hope of success, would—

Otto: "And so this is a first, Natsuki-san." Subaru: "—Huh?"

Confused at what he's hearing, Subaru's mouth drops open as he looks at Otto. With a stupidly cheery expression—

Otto: "For acting with disregard to chances of success, and so opting for the choice with no visible hope of winning, this is a first."

—Otto asserts.

＊＊＊＊＊＊＊＊＊＊

His legs speed on. His breath runs out.

Pursuing his heart as it outspeeds him over the meadow, impatient, Subaru's body cases in wind.

Slicing through the cool morning air, giving great swings of his arms, Subaru runs step after giant step.

He kicks off on the dirt, steps on the stones, dashing perfectly straight along the shoddy path.

What eventually cuts into the sprinting Subaru's vision is his destined building.

His cheeks twist with unwitting exhilaration, unveiling his teeth. His tongue hanging out his mouth like a dog's, breathing ragged, Subaru bounds forward as he shoves his arm for the building's entrance.

And,

Subaru: “—Roswaal!”

Belting the door open, Subaru tumbles into the building. He steps over the entryway, dashes through the lounge connected to the living room, and shoves the flimsy door open with a force liable to break it.

Inside is Roswaal, upright on the bed, with Ram caring for him professionally. Subaru sights the surprise flashing over both of their faces.

Getting such an unguarded reaction from the always-untouchable Roswaal

and always-apathetic and brazen Ram together was rare.

A good omen for the present, where he was attempting something he never had before.

Linking their surprise to thoughts of good fortune, Subaru jabs his finger at the yet-wordless master and servant.

Subaru: “—Let's make a bet. Between you and me, with a wish as the chip.”

Chapter 87: Oni Out, Clowns In

Two surprised gazes land on the out-of-breath, just-barged-in Subaru.

Both of these people were ones Subaru considered entirely unrelated to the concept of 'looking surprised'. Feeling some satisfaction at their reactions, the wicked smile on Subaru's face intensifies.

Roswaal: "—A bet?"

Mutters Roswaal on the bed as he narrows his odd-coloured eyes.

His face with its supposed clown make-up is presently devoid of any paint, and bare. This was the plain face of Roswaal, which Subaru had only seen once before during any loop series.

The skin beneath his white cosmetics is pallid. Without his eyeliner his looks give a homespun rather than sharp vibe, the impression incredibly and excessively different from what Roswaal himself puts out. His face—which when wearing makeup appears that of someone calculating and shady—transforms swiftly into that of a fine young lad, just by ditching the paint.

Handsome's handsome without needing anything, is how Subaru internally appraises the bare face as he gives Roswaal's mutter a nod.

Subaru: "Yeah, a bet. You and me, staking a wish... a real one-shot make-or-break." Roswaal: "—"

Subaru raises his finger as he magnificently states his line. Roswaal's expression is one of careful scrutiny over the proposal. But before he can say anything, a silhouette cuts into the space between them—it's the pink-haired maid, Ram.

Roswaal to her back, Ram's gaze as she faces Subaru is severe. While Ram's

looks toward Subaru are usually sharp, and she is always ready to scold him should there be opportunity, that does not compare at all to her eyes in this moment.

Ram: "Hold, Barusu. You come barging into the room, and just when we wonder what you're going to say... do you mean to burden Roswaal-sama in his convalescence? Surely disrespect in the utmost."

Subaru: "Considering his actual situation, injury or sickness's a pretty weak reason to be easing up on him. And that's all unrelated to his looseness of tongue or blackness of spirit... I'm gonna be having him push himself for a sec."

Ram: "Barusu—"

Subaru: "And I'm gonna be doing it no matter what anyone says!"

Ram's eyes host a blend of irritation and dangerousness. But before she can act, Subaru takes the initiative by giving the floor a big, loud stomp. He points at Ram, who halts in caution.

Subaru: "I've got no reason to stop or need to hesitate. We had enough of a thing between us for at least this much, Roswaal."

Roswaal: "—Hrm."

Subaru: "Or is some straying from your diary all it takes for you to sulk and your motivation to shoot to zero? Where's your backbone to get a little bit crazy for your coming selves?"

Roswaal: "...An intriguing statement. My coming selves, hm."

Subaru chooses his words so that they will communicate to Roswaal without directly touching on the topic of RETURN BY DEATH. Ram's brows furrow in confusion, but Roswaal does look to comprehend.

A slight vigour returns to his lifeless face.

Roswaal: "Ram. Stand down. ...No, raaaaaaaather, could you excuse yourself outside for a moment?" Ram: "...Yes, but, Roswaal-sama."

Roswaal: "Nothing to worry, nothing to worry. Subaru-kun isn't thoughtless enough to suddenly start attacking just beeeeeeeeause we're alone. And it would be very easy to defeat him anyway. Yeeeeeee?"

Subaru: "Yeah, pathetic as it is. If we got into strength-wise combat, I'm not confident I could even pull him off the bed."

Ram's cheeks twist in tooth-grinding frustration as Subaru gives his assent, waving his empty hands about. She again sends Roswaal her gaze, gloomy.

Ram: "—I request you might abstain from anything that may encumber you."

After a dignified curtsey, she heads for the exit of the room. She sends Subaru a glance just before passing him by.

Ram: "—There'll be no concessions should anything happen to Roswaal-sama."

Subaru: "Rather you worry more about him pulling something in his self-destructive fit."

Seeing Ram off with a shrug, Subaru watches the door shut before turning back to face Roswaal. Roswaal's expression remains thoughtful as he closes one eye, catching Subaru in the gaze of the yellow.

Roswaal: "Again your expression looks cooooooonsiderably different from what it was at parting laaaaaaaaaast night. Has some mental shift occurred in only these few hours?"

Subaru: "Mental shift, 's I guess not wrong. Got a lecture, had a punchout, and then friendship... or really no it was too one-sided to be a punchout and felt more like having a re-realization."

Touching the cheek that Otto punched, Subaru thinks back on the still-faintly-red happening from this morning.

Despite his delicate frame, Otto is surprisingly strong. Probably came from a difference in the number of dilemmas he's been through compared to Subaru. Subaru had gotten in quite a few confrontations since coming to this world, but apparently he hasn't caught up yet.

Subaru: "Seriously though what a vicious world..."

Roswaal: "Really now, is it. Weeeeeell, we had just confirmed yesterday as well that I hadn't cornered you enough, buuuuuuut it seems no mistake to judge that your comeback was swift."

Subaru: "Still at my absolute limit though. ...Just doing everything I can."

It feels like Otto's words and fists have slapped his warped willpower back straight.

And used a horrifically graceless, simple method to do it. Having a friend punch you back on track was incredibly babyish, and if it had happened to someone else then Subaru definitely would've poked fun at them for it.

Subaru: "But I don't think it was bad. Getting a buddy's help when the stalemate looks about hopeless and figuring things out feels good."

Roswaal: "Naive. Young, immature. ...Ultimately you can only solve the suffering of this world by yourself. These nerveless ideas about relying on friends are unneeded for you."

Subaru: "Relying on friends, relying on ties, relying on feelings... not gonna work out, huh?" Roswaal: "Wooooon't work at all."

Subaru: "Really. —Well then, all we can do now is challenge each other."

Roswaal's expression shifts. Subaru approaches Roswaal on the bed, stepping forth as he clicks his fingers, and points the clicked finger at Roswaal.

Subaru: "As said, let's make a bet. The chip is a wish, the table is a one-round limit." Roswaal: "Let's listen tooooooooo what there is to hear."

Confirming that Roswaal is not outright rejecting the proposal, Subaru aims his outstretched finger to the ceiling as he proofs the prerequisites.

Subaru: "On this attempt, I won't be acting in accord with your hopes. And that's not limited to just now, I'm not intending to accord on following attempts either, but... even saying I keep insisting that, it's just a parallel line between me

and you. So let's establish a limit."

Roswaal: "A limit?" Subaru nods.

Subaru: "Yeah."

He wets his lips with his tongue, glaring Roswaal straight in the eye.

Subaru: "On this attempt I'll bust through things using my way. And if it looks to be a bungle... from next time onwards I'll act the way you want me to. That's the limit."

Roswaal: "—You're dismissing the privileges of your ability to redo?"

Subaru: "You said it yourself. Your methods for cornering me weren't enough. I agree. —The consequences of getting cocky about redoing was that debacle."

Though of course he has no intention to entirely disown the concept.

What could Natsuki Subaru manage in this cruel world without RETURN BY DEATH? He had no intention to invalidate the boons he had gained through RETURN BY DEATH, and nor to be shameless about them.

But his thought process had changed. He'd do whatever he could, and if that ended in a RETURN BY DEATH then he would begrudgingly accept it. But if that was not the case, and he was dying before he lived to his full, then—

Subaru: "That's heresy against those who'd cry for me. I'm not doing that any more."

Roswaal: "And that's what you're limiting yourself for... iiiiiis it. While I hadn't asked for it, it is a favourable condition fooooooor me, but where is your guarantee that you will abide by this?"

Subaru: "So, a guarantee."

Roswaal: "Yes, a guarantee. Those are veeeeeeeery important. Aaaaaaafter all, you with your ability to redo can make it so that this promise neeeeeeeeever happened. You fail, reset to return to last night, deeeeeeeejectedly decide to attempt another method..."

Subaru: "Roswaal."

Subaru quietly calls the name of the anxiety-speaking Roswaal.

His statements cut off and faced with Subaru's gaze, Roswaal's eyes widen slightly. Subaru continues, his tone of voice the same.

Subaru: "Do you think I'd do that?" Roswaal: "—"

Subaru: "If you do, then... this talk isn't going to happen. That's all." Roswaal narrows his eyes. Then lightly raises his hands, sighing.

Roswaal: "No, nooooo,"

Roswaal: "Let's heeeeeeeeear the rest of it. I can decide at the end."

Subaru: "...Please. But like I said before, we'll set a limit. I'll put everything I have into this attempt. If it doesn't work out then I'll do things the way you say to. Since either way... if this method doesn't work, I doubt there's anything left."

Roswaal: "You're confident, is not the case here. But you are resolved. ...Weeeeell then, I will have to answer to that. Now, you're establishing a cutoff, and stating that this attempt is the last. So what could it be you're demanding frooooooom me, then?"

Roswaal's tone is beginning to return to normal.

With these negotiations, exchanges, mutual agreement to ideas going on, Subaru claps his hands.

Subaru: "My demand's simple. Supposing hypothetically that on this attempt my methods break the deadlock, the consequent future will differ from your desires. In that case you'll probably lose will to live in a world differing from your gospel, but... there'll be none of that."

Roswaal: "None of that, refers to me losing my determination? Hoooooowever, I'm forced to say that that is a difficult demand. While of course I likely could manage a superficial faaaaaaaacade, in my truest thoughts I would..."

Subaru: "But whatever, Roswaal. It's not like I want us to always be as enemies." Roswaal: "—Hn?"

Roswaal tilts his head, confused by Subaru's statement. Subaru rubs his finger against his nose in response.

Subaru: "I know that you'd hate the future to differ from the gospel, and veer from the route for the future you decided. But even saying the future varies from the gospel, I'll still be bustling on all I want to make Emilia Ruler. And I'll definitely be relying on the power to redo. —Who cares about the route getting there, the ultimate results won't deviate from your goals."

Roswaal falls silent.

Subaru: "My demand's simple, Roswaal. If I open a path to a continuing future which differs from the gospel... then you throw the gospel away and come with me. I'm making Emilia Ruler. I need your help for that."

No matter what unforgivable deeds Roswaal sullies his hands with, his aid is necessary for Emilia's goals. Subaru himself still did harbour a lack of understanding, a lack of comprehension, and a disgust for him. Should things be left as they are on this timeline, then his machinations will conclude to an irreparable aftermath. —But Subaru himself would snuff that conclusion, and avoid a definitive divide.

Roswaal sighs a long, deep sigh.

Eyes closed in thought as he strokes his chin, Roswaal's lips part slowly.
Roswaal: "That's the ultimate compromise you're looking for... I see, then."

Subaru: "It's a pretty convenient thing though. But y'know, me, I love convenient things. Emilia puts in all her efforts and becomes Ruler, I celebrate that from beside her, and so now you come join us as one of the crowd included."

Roswaal: "This is a difficult proposition for me, when I have kept to one method for a long, loooooooong time. If you're to get me to act, theeeeeeen... that would necessitate strict conditions, yes?"

Subaru: "Yeah, does."

Roswaal shuts one eye. Subaru gives him a nod as he raises two of his fingers.

Sensing that Roswaal's attention has focused on the tips of those two fingers, Subaru gives one of them a light flick.

Subaru: "There's two conditions. Two conditions you said were impossible, never happening. Once I clear those conditions, I'm winner of the bet."

Roswaal: "And should the conditions remain unfulfilled, the victory is mine. I will have you discard your humanity."

As he speaks in low, heavy tone, Roswaal watches Subaru with both eyes. Nodding, and in the path of Roswaal's gaze, Subaru grits his teeth once before slicing right to the topic.

Subaru: "First condition. —I make Garfiel an ally, and bring him outside."

Roswaal: "—"

Subaru: "You said it's never gonna happen that SANCTUARY-obsessed Garfiel is gonna come outside. I agree. Agree, but... we need his strength, for the future too. And also out of consideration for the people of SANCTUARY, we can't just leave them with an impossible, tantruming kid. In the persuasion of Garfiel which you proclaimed isn't gonna happen, I am going to succeed."

Roswaal: "—The second?"

The instant he hears the first condition, a darkness passes through the depths of Roswaal's eyes. But Subaru goes without mentioning it as he nods to Roswaal.

Subaru: "—I'm gonna have Emilia beat the TRIAL. The one to overcome the tomb's TRIAL and free SANCTUARY will be Emilia. Not me."

Roswaal: "That is impossible!"

Yelling, Roswaal strikes his palm against the bed.

The thud rings out, Roswaal's visage twisted in rage. He squares his shoulders angrily, jabbing his finger at Subaru.

Roswaal: "I informed you yesterday. That thing is incapable of beating the TRIAL. And it is not possible that Garfiel would abandon his obsession for SANCTUARY, either!"

Subaru: "Won't know that until I try it."

Roswaal: "Exactly, you would not know that until you tried it. And is it not exactly because you have repeated that numerous times over that you came to me so entirely overwhelmed!? Your visage then, and your very resolve now, is the proof that those two do not merit any hope!"

Says Roswaal, practically yelling, his shoulders heaving up and down. While he takes ragged breath after ragged breath, it is Subaru whose expression remains calm.

Subaru: "Well isn't that some fucking spirited anger." Roswaal: "What?"

Subaru: "It's to your advantage that the conditions on me are strict. Makes no sense to start getting pissed about their harshness."

Roswaal: "This is a discussion on a different dimension, of the potential

realization of the bet. When it is not handicaps but in fact propriety which is questionable, the very outcomes of the bet are liable to ruin. It's natural that I would be cautious."

Roswaal is untrustworthy of these conditions which are too disadvantageous to Subaru, and too advantageous to himself. But Subaru's cheeks twist at Roswaal's reaction. To deepen his wicked, wicked grin.

Subaru: "Roswaal, looks like you don't get it." Roswaal says nothing.

Subaru: "I'm too disadvantaged? Well yeah, glancing over them they definitely are harsh conditions. Only with this much can you save face about having to revise your masterplan, is a thought I've been thinking. Is, but this is still about something else."

And with the smile still on his face, Subaru: "You're who said it, Roswaal." Roswaal: "—"

Subaru: "When I'm cornered, I'm the strongest card. —It isn't in the shape you want, but you're talking to the strongest card without a doubt. Still unsatisfied?"

States Subaru definitively. Roswaal is silent.

He simply stares fixedly at Subaru, getting his breaths back in order. And once his breathing has calmed down, Roswaal raises his finger.

Roswaal: "—Contract."

Subaru: "—"

Roswaal: "Fair enough. We'll have me accept these conditions you've presented. —The liberation of Garfiel from his curse, and Emilia-sama's liberation of SANCTUARY. Once both of these have occurred, I will discard my plan, and travel the path you construct. Let us form a contract for this purpose."

A dim light flickers atop Roswaal's raised finger.

The rainbow-coloured concentration of mana highly resembles the light Julius used in destroying Betelgeux, which was a combination of multiple classes of magic.

Roswaal: "Through our gates, we will carve the contract into our souls. No matter who you may deceive, you cannot deceive your own heart. —The contract engraved in our souls will persist over distance, over time, even over worlds. It will likely have effect against your resets, too."

Subaru: "What, has to be something you can do about them. ...But, eh, convenient for me, doing this. We're both bound by contract, and it saves me time beating the tantrum out of you when you lose the bet."

Roswaal: "It doesn't appear that you're regarding this lightly... but, very well." Roswaal does not say much about Subaru's willingness to accept the contract.

The gleam on his finger moves to contact the centre of Subaru's chest, and then comes the sensation of something seeping into his body. Immediately, a wave pulses out from inside him, as if opening all the pores down his body. He exhales.

Subaru: "Au, hauhh—"

Roswaal: "Identically, I will engrave it on my soul. —Once Natsuki Subaru's contract has been fulfilled, Roswaal L. Mathers' contract shall also be fulfilled."

The rainbow light bursts identically on Roswaal's chest.

For an instant the glow permeates down Roswaal's whole body, him returning to normal in the space of a blink.

Subaru: "Is that the end?"

Roswaal: "That is the end. ...There's no rescinding it now."

Confirming their mutual inability to flee, Subaru gives a small gulp. Roswaal puts his hand to his chest.

Roswaal: "Just as you shall invest your greatest efforts into fulfilling your conditions, I will be acting to actualize the gospel's writ. You won't fault me for that, will you?"

Subaru: "—The snowfall in five days is happening again."

Roswaal: "...If Emilia-sama does not bring the snowfall, it will likely turn out thaaaaaaat I will be doing it."

Meaning the time limit is set.

The Sizeable Hare will attack in five days' time. Emilia needs to liberate SANCTUARY, and Subaru needs to liberate Garfiel from his curse, before then.

Subaru: "And with that, time is precious. I'm off getting started now."

Roswaal: "Subaru-kun."

Subaru moves away from the bed to immediately start his activities, when Roswaal calls him. Subaru glances back. Roswaal averts his gaze somewhat.

Roswaal: "The mansion is the same day. —I'll be praying for your good fight."

Subaru: "Because if I try my very hardest and fail, next time I'll probably act exactly how you want me to... right?"

Roswaal: "—"

Roswaal answers to Subaru's reply with silence.

After giving him a wry smile, Subaru finishes off by pointing at Roswaal. Subaru: "Roswaal, it's throwing your vibe off so put the clown makeup back on."

Roswaal: "Hrm, actually... this would be the first time I've spoken to you without cosmetics." Subaru: "In this universe, yeah."

Subaru can tell that Roswaal's eyes widen at this insinuation. Feeling Roswaal's reaction at his back, Subaru starts walking.

Subaru: "This's a match between me and you. A couple of clowns tossed around by fate—let's have us doing it fair and square."

With those words, he leaves the room.

The conditions of the bet are in place. —And so, here is where it begins. Natsuki Subaru's final challenge, with SANCTUARY's freedom as the wager.

Chapter 88: Garfiel's Intentions

Otto: "So, did you successfully manage to have a contract tied?"

After speaking with Roswaal and leaving the building, Subaru takes a little walk to reunite with Otto. The two are now in a corner of the cathedral, reporting their respective results to each other. Subaru gives Otto's question a nod.

Subaru: "Yeah, went good. Was worried about the chance he'd be perfectly moody and not agree to the bet, but... think the unfavourable conditions on me got us through that."

Otto: "Probably they did. When you get challenged to a contest that one-sided in favour to you... and on top of that, even have a blueprint to tell you that you won't lose, it'd be insane to withdraw." Something something although of course I had considered the chance that your silver tongue would be too silver and a contract wouldn't develop.

Subaru: "You say that, but... you entirely believed a contract would happen, yeah?" Otto: "Indeed, I did."

Otto crosses his arms as he affirms Subaru's statement, as if this is all very normal. Otto's deeds were, albeit a temporary one, something of a beguiling of Roswaal. Subaru's eyes widen.

Otto smiles wryly at Subaru.

Otto: "Merchants use written letters when forming agreements which include more conditions than the standard, but... adept magicians often use contracts. And when the other party is the leading magic representative of the country... I

figured it overwhelmingly probable that it would draw him.”

Subaru: “By the way so contracts, is it possible to sneak unrelated details into them? Like this's what Roswaal said, but actually he tied me into a different contract.”

If hypothetically saying this is the case, then Subaru has no means to confirm it.

It had been a contract to alter the team's future situation, dictated by the outcome of the bet, but supposing now it's a contract saying 'keep breathing and you die the next day'—or so on, Subaru wouldn't know.

Subaru shudders at his own imaginings, but Otto just gives a wave of his hand.

Otto: “They're such a thing where those deceptions would be rendered ineffective. Margrave Roswaal must have mentioned it when he tied the contract? That they're etched into your soul. Contracts actualize only once the parties mutually agree to it, and their understandings of the terms align. Unless there was some considerable glibness involved, he wouldn't have tied you into a contract diverging from your recognitions.”

Subaru: “I'm hearing something that implies there's an exception if you get tricked with cunning wordplay.”

Otto: “...This would best be kept between us, but apparently before legislations came in place, and the world was generally in a more haphazard time, swindlers who utilized contracts were very prevalent. Should the fraudster be a minor rogue that would be no problem, but if an unpleasant and powerful magician focused in on you, I wouldn't want to even imagine the damages.”

Otto shrinks his shoulders up in fear, Subaru too shrinking his shoulders in agreement.

Roswaal was most likely fine as contract partner. While he definitely is unpleasant and powerful, the only outright pure evil to him is his methods and his obsession with his goal. It was safe to think he lacked any intention to abuse the contract and definitively cut all friendly ties with Subaru.

Hypothetically assuming that Roswaal did mislead Subaru—Subaru would wholeheartedly utilize his privilege to repeat events to entirely break, annihilate, and destroy Roswaal's mind.

Subaru wanted to place the bare minimum of trust in him, that that wouldn't happen, for both of their sakes.

Subaru: "Anyway, so that's how my side went, how'd you go?"

Otto: "How, is really the question. I honestly have to tell you that it's difficult to say whether I got any response. Since we're near gambling about some parts. ...I doubt there will be especially many opportunities for it, either."

Otto, who had been performing a different duty while Subaru was negotiating with Roswaal, does not wear a bright expression. Indeed, the things Subaru requested of Otto are much more likely to fail than succeed, and include very much of a gamble. But if they could pull it off, it would draw them remarkably closer to their win conditions.

Unclear how many chances they have left for it within this five-day space, though.

Subaru: "We'll keep an eye on how things're going for that, then. So then I guess we're stuck again with having to do something in this time limit."

Otto: "What's more urgent is Emilia-sama and Garfiel. Notably for having Emilia-sama defeat the TRIAL, where I can't offer any help. It's not impossible to assess it as being dependant on you, Natsuki-san."

Subaru: "Yeah. ...I do respect her want to do it by herself, and well now that I've lost my qualifications I can't do it for her."

But regardless, even saying that Emilia keeps challenging the TRIAL as she has been, her chances of clearing it by the fifth day are inevitably looking poor. Emilia's mind should remain unbroken so long as Subaru stays in SANCTUARY, but they won't be able to avoid her abrading as she fails the TRIAL.

She needs to have some kind of change—and Subaru needs to be the one to initiate it. Subaru: "—It's an enough's enough, we need to seriously face each other."

Otto says nothing.

Subaru: "This here's the payback for a lot of things. I think I've run away, because I didn't want to ask and recognize there's implacable things between me and Emilia. I took advantage of how Emilia won't say anything, and she's definitely taking advantage of how I haven't been trying to ask her."

Otto: "—I believe it important to mutually speak and tell of what is in your hearts. If I had only ever associated with the jolly you, Natsuki-san, I wouldn't know what would be coming in five days' time."

Says Otto consolingly, to which Subaru scratches his cheek in silent gratitude. That he's thoughtful enough not to scold weak Subaru for continuously avoiding

the issue does make Subaru rather happy.

Otto: "Or actually, what exactly is this all liking and loving when you haven't even addressed each other to this extent, it's absurd. Would you like to please stop affecting immaculate emotional purity?"

Subaru: "—Y'know, you're..."

Their mutual embarrassment wins out as Otto quickly starts with the teasing, to which Subaru frowns. That he doesn't retort is because Otto is correct.

Subaru's fundamentally good-for-nothing character had invited this outcome, where various places are just one step away from where they need to be.

But that's gone far enough, time to stop running.

Subaru: "It'll be kinda improv but I'll try being open with Emilia. Since I don't think things I've already done are things I can't do."

Otto: "...Well, I'll be trusting in your judgement, Natsuki-san. Though of course I would prefer not to do anything like stay inside SANCTUARY until the fifth day, when the Sizeable Hare will come."

Although looking like he wants to say something in reply to Subaru's statement, Otto ultimately clams up and averts his gaze.

Otto: "Now, getting to the other one," Says Otto, changing the topic.

Otto: "What would your ideas be for Garfiel?"

Subaru: "The hint's he's afraid of the outside. I think it has to do with the past

he saw when he took the tomb's TRIAL. If we could just know the details of what happened..."

Otto: "This certainly isn't something we can directly ask him about. I doubt his personality is a tame enough one to quietly overlook it when someone gouges straight into his emotional wounds."

Subaru: "And if he leaves himself to rage and smacks us, you and me'd both have our neckbones disappeared in one blow. We really are a just team with worries combat-wise..."

That's obvious for the overly-amateur amateur Subaru, and Otto's ability is that of a travelling merchant accustomed to fights. They are definitely not brawny battlers, and when enumerating the combatant hierarchy of SANCTUARY, it'd probably be quicker to start from the bottom for both of them.

Subaru: "And thinking in that sense too, man I really want someone in a military-command-type position. We have Roswaal, Emilia and Ram, and I guess Frederica too and that's all we've got for fighters, it's a huge problem for our team. We need Garfiel for the faction."

That he does not include Rem is probably because her condition is the outcome of a battle. Even though he knows that it's merely his selfishness, he does not want to send this girl he will recover back to the battle-lines.

Subaru: "We'll coax Garfiel into our circle with eloquence and finesse. And for that purpose too, we need to get rid of his trauma. The missing pieces for that are..."

Otto: "The missing portions are...?"

Subaru: "If we can't ask him, we gotta drag it in from someplace else. Lewes-san or Ram. Both feel like they'd be tight-lipped about it."

Who would these two side with when there was confrontation between Subaru and Roswaal? There's merit in giving them a shot, if for that purpose as well.

Subaru guzzles down his breakfast, patting at his butt as he stands up and clicks his neck. Subaru: "Right, time to get started then. I'll be off trying Lewes-san, so..."

Otto: "And I'll be following to the aforementioned schedule... right. I'll pass the story around to them in advance, but it would be entirely preferable that we could settle all this without using it."

Subaru: "I don't really wanna think about it either. I don't, but... I just kinda get the feeling that we're gonna be relying on that, like probability at seventy, eighty percent..."

Otto: "How high. ...Although, not that I can refute it."

The two glance at each other as they sigh, Subaru then shaking his head to compose himself. He raises his hand to the yet-frazzled-looking Otto.

Subaru: "Anyway, all we can do's do it. When all this's done and neatly over, we're gonna have an amazing toast."

Says Subaru as he stretches his fingers out, presenting Otto his palm. After a moment of confusion Otto senses Subaru's intentions, raising his hand identically.

Otto: "We will, and while also for the sake of my dazzling future, let's all hope we do it well." Subaru: "You said it."

Sharing a mischievous smile, the two high-five.

The slap bursts through the air of the cathedral. Amid the gazes of the surprised villagers, Subaru and Otto turn, each to the other's back—and walk.

※ * * * * * * * * * *

Subaru: "Lewes-san, are you here? I have something I wanna talk about."

Bounding over the earth and its poor footholds, Subaru cuts through to the pungent, acrid-smelling room. While thinking exasperatedly about how he's getting used to the stench, Subaru strides over ruined scraps as he looks at the gleam of the blue crystal ahead.

As ever, inside the jewel is a naked girl in wakeless sleep. Subaru brushes his palm against the crystal's face, again dejects himself with the confirmation that nothing is happening, and looks over the room.

The dim, blue glimmer from the crystal is the only light source in this dingy space. For a place reeking of terrible stench there really are absolutely no rats or bugs, and after thinking coolheadedly about it and getting the sense that this place is ridiculously unhealthy, Subaru finally begins having some worries for his bodily condition.

Subaru: "No mice or bugs living here perhaps could maybe mean the air is

polluted like crazy?"

???: "Yer don't needter have any'er those queer worries. The witch's vestiges jerst lie too heavily here... the animals instinctively sense it and wern't come near, that's all."

A voice calls from behind to invalidate the worries of a shoulder-hugging, shuddering Subaru. It's a familiar voice, young pitch to elderly diction. Subaru turns around, for his gaze to land on Lewes.

She walks over to Subaru's side as he stands before the crystal, looking up at Subaru with eyes the same colour as her hair.

Lewes: "Now, Su-bo. That yer here on purpose means... yer already know about what I am." Subaru:

"I got an explanation about it directly from the place's manager. Also talked though vaguely about you inheriting the representative role, pretty sure I got the gist of things."

Lewes: "I, see. So thert's why Roz-bo's been strange since morning. —Roz-bo muster failed again."

Lewes lowers her eyes, a pained expression rising on her face. Subaru raises his brows.

Subaru: "Unintentionally and unexpectedly, feel like I just heard a part of what I was gonna ask.

...Lewes-san, so do you know about Roswaal's plans?"

Lewes: "Only a part erv them. If he dersn't have someone ter communicate serm level erv the situation with, it weredn't make sense fer people ter agree with why Roz-bo does these baffling things. ...Although, it's probably because erv this that Gar-bo's angry with him."

Subaru: "A part, how much?" Lewes: "Su-bo?"

Subaru closes the distance between himself and Lewes by one step, his voice dropping in pitch. Perhaps sensing the change in Subaru's tone, a look of surprise flashes through Lewes's eyes.

Subaru bends down, matching his eye level to Lewes'.

Subaru: "Please tell me, Lewes-san. How much of Roswaal's plan have you heard? Depending on the answer, I..."

Lewes: "Su-bo..."

Roswaal's plan—to put the world on a track according to the gospel by making Elsa attack the mansion, encasing SANCTUARY in snow to invite the Hare, ultimately killing everybody involved, in an attempt to isolate Subaru and make him forfeit his heart.

If Lewes knew everything and had gone without stopping him, was complicit, then—

Subaru: "I don't want to scorn you, Lewes-san. Please tell me. How much did you know? How much have you been helping Roswaal?"

Lewes: "...What I know ers that Roz-bo has a gospel he gert from the witch, ernd that he's rewriting histery ter match its text. SANCTUARY's continued

existence, too, ers because it's written in the gospel. Were it not fer that, I'd say we wouldder stopped protecting him a long time ago."

Subaru: "...Is that all?"

Lewes: "That's all. And I cern say that as pledge. The contract I'm born with means I can abserlutely never tell lies."

Gazing firmly back at Subaru, a sincere expression rises on Lewes's young face. With her contract keeping her from telling lies also considered, Subaru decides to believe her.

His rigid shoulders instantly lose their tenseness as he sighs in relief.

Subaru: "Okay, thank god. If even you were thinking the same brutish fucking ideas as Roswaal, I wouldda had to slap you around too when this's all over. Slapping Lewes-san who looks like a loli, just visualizing it's horrid."

Lewes: "I am honestly sorry fer worrying yer, but fer some reason after like listening ter what yer saying, that sorriness feels ter be going."

Lewes goes along with Subaru's intentional joking, done to clear the oppressive atmosphere. She puts her hand to her chin.

Lewes: "So,"

Lewes: "Goin' from yer tone before, this ersn't anything trifling? Su-bo, just what on earth squabble did yer have with Roz-bo?"

Subaru: "Leaving aside whether it was a cute enough to be a squabble... right now, we're having a contest. I think objectively speaking if I win it's the wonderful finale, so I've kinda been wanting your help."

Lewes: "Judging from the conversation, this has something to do with the future of SANCTUARY, too. What're you and Roz-bo thinking, Su-bo? ...If I don't know that first, I can't just carelessly accept."

Subaru: "Well yeah. Right, how to explain..."

Tilting his head, Subaru deliberates over how much information he should give. He had been open with Otto, and it doesn't seem like Lewes is entirely biased toward Roswaal. In fact, it feels more like she's in the place she is because she has to be cordial with Roswaal.

With this in mind, Subaru considers his stance carefully.

Subaru: "Putting it simply... it's about how to deal with SANCTUARY after the barrier's gone." Lewes: "How to deal with SANCTUARY, after the barrier's gone."

Subaru: "I heard a snippet about this from Garfiel too, but there's a split of opinion inside SANCTUARY, yeah? Support and opposition for going outside."

The supporters were the majority, and opposition were the minority. But the extremist portion of the opposition group were liable to obstruct Subaru and Emilia, who is taking the TRIAL to free SANCTUARY.

Having spent nearly twenty days looping in SANCTUARY already, Subaru figures that the vanguard of the opposition group is probably Garfiel. Lewes would be the head of the support clique, is the story, but just what would she

think about this difference in opinions?

Lewes: "Split of opinion? No, there shouldn't be anything like that." Subaru: "Wh?"

Lewes: "Whether we leave or stay in this land after the liberation is up to everybody's individual, personal judgement. Most of us are wishing to follow Roz-bo and leave. ...The ones who stay behind will do so because of their desires to remain in this land to their grave. Where in this is a split of opinion?"

Subaru: "Ue, eh... no, but..."

The shock of hearing something entirely unexpected discombobulates Subaru.

The battle in SANCTUARY between the supporters and opposition. The antagonism from this, and the stances toward liberating SANCTUARY. Subaru's plan had been to jolt the conversation by using these topics, and in doing so secure Garfiel as an ally.

Subaru: "If there was actually never any opposition..."

Lewes: "—"

Subaru: "Then that was just him coming up with random junk? That was actually him claiming there's opposition to put us on caution in advance, so that we'd think it was normal when obstructions happened afterwards?"

If so, that's a level of thought that doesn't sound much like him, thinks Subaru.

To divert suspicions from himself, he had given a warning in advance about the obstructions that could happen, removing himself from the list of suspects.

Although since Subaru had gone through multiple loops of SANCTUARY, and knew that the biggest obstruction was Garfiel going on a rampage, the advisory amounted to basically no significance.

Subaru: "He really wants to obstruct SANCTUARY's freedom so much that he'll pull these unfitting stunts...?"

Lewes: "...Yer talking about Gar-bo."

Hearing his muttering, Lewes supposes who Subaru is talking about. She lowers her eyes, a gloom casting over her face.

Lewes: "That he dersen't want to go outside ers probably because erv our weakness..." Subaru: "Weakness, meaning?"

Lewes: "Meaning what weakness means. We've lived here ever since our births. And so we don't know anything about the world outside this place. We don't know, and so we're weak. It must torment Gar-bo terribly."

Subaru: "—"

Subaru does understand what Lewes is talking about.

For the residents of SANCTUARY, who have lived in a constrained world, a closed space, the connection to the outside world after the liberation would be something completely unknown and new.

The longer that one spent in this land, naturally the more they would feel anxiety rather than hope in regard to this new something. That was the incredible effect of the breakdown of one's unchanging, mundane, everyday

life.

Subaru: "Garfiel doesn't want SANCTUARY freed because he can't stand to see people hurt by upheaval in their circumstances... maybe? It doesn't fit his character at all, but..."

If true, and this was why Garfiel had so desperately interfered with SANCTUARY's release, then his thought pattern was exactly the same thought pattern Subaru had possessed as he tried distancing Emilia from hardship.

Garfiel was ignoring the opinions of Lewes and the residents, attempting to implement his self-thought methods for protecting them. Then in that case, perhaps if he could have a proper conversation with Lewes and the residents like with Subaru, that would solve the problem.

Subaru: "No, it's not that simple."

Subaru and Garfiel are identical in how they desire for what they seek, but their positions are different. Subaru's wishes fail because he lacks in ability.

But not Garfiel. Garfiel has the strength to keep SANCTUARY from being liberated. Should he attack Subaru and Emilia, exterminate those qualified to challenge the TRIAL, then his wishes would succeed. The problem here is that even if he does this and holes up in SANCTUARY, that will offer no escape from the Sizeable Hare's pending attack.

But that was a fact unknown to Garfiel, and something he likely would not believe even if Subaru informed him. The situation is far too different when compared to explaining it to Otto.

Subaru: "If we're just looking for grounds for compromise, this still isn't it... but, it's weird." Lewes: "Su-bo?"

Subaru: "Why isn't he from the outset taking the quickest, most efficient method for stopping SANCTUARY's release, and killing me and Emilia?"

If he truly did not care at all about his appearance, and was wholeheartedly pursuing one single goal like how Roswaal was, Garfiel ought to take Subaru and Emilia's lives immediately.

But it has never occurred that he inflicted direct harm on Emilia. Even in situations where he attacks Subaru, he takes no action until Subaru engages in some kind of incredible activity.

Subaru still cannot clearly define what the trigger for Garfiel killing him is. Unmistakably, killing Subaru is an attempt to prevent SANCTUARY's release. But the reason for why he does it remains unclear.

Subaru: "There has to be a trigger. ...But thinking back on all the times Garfiel's attacked me, has there been a coherent consistency?"

The times Garfiel attacked Subaru were when he flew into a rage and pounced at Roswaal, and when he took the villagers to escape SANCTUARY. — Ultimately, that's all.

Looking objectively at the scene with Roswaal, to judge Subaru as wrong for pouncing at a wounded person was completely normal. There's not much to distrust Garfiel for there.

The problem is the second occurrence, where he attempted to kill a Subaru he had already failed to murder.

Garfiel, transformed into a tiger to kill Subaru, had cast his fangs and claws on Ram, Patrasche, and the villagers who had willed for Subaru to live. While Subaru had not died, the hatred Subaru felt for Garfiel after surmounting the slaughter still has yet to disappear.

But how much of a decision did Garfiel need to make before sullying his hands

with that? There had to be something to trigger it.

But looking back on it, it doesn't seem like the trigger came from Subaru's end.

Meaning that the impetus for the massacre was not on Subaru's, but due to something occurring on Garfiel's end.

Subaru: "Lewes-san. Garfiel may look rough and reckless, but he's not a guy who would frivolously move to violence... would be a safe assessment?"

Lewes: "He's fundamentally a kind boy. It's by putting on a tough shell and barking before anything can happen that he protects himself and those around him. ...The strengths he's acquired are probably also for that purpose."

Subaru: "Right, then... there's only one solution." Lewes: "—?"

Subaru rubs at his nose, turning to face Lewes properly as she tilts her head. Putting his hand to the crystal, feeling the chill on his palm,

Subaru: "Someone's giving Garfiel these fucking suggestions. Their actions are the trigger for Garfiel suddenly pulling violent bullshit."

Adopt the idea that Garfiel's rather out-of-character actions were on somebody's instruction, and things make sense. The most likely candidates for someone collaborating with Garfiel were,

Subaru: "Roswaal, Ram, Lewes-san, potentially a yet-unseen malevolence..." Someone from this lineup is spurring Garfiel to violence.

Subaru needs to identify them. He will only be able to have a real talk, for the

first time, with Garfiel once he has.

Subaru: "So just for reference Lewes-san, could I ask you something?" Lewes: "Hn, what is it?"

Subaru: "—Do you know the contents of the TRIAL Garfiel took in the tomb?" Lewes: "...Nope, I don't. I'm sorry, but that's nert something within my knowledge."

Lewes shakes her head. Being that she is bound not to tell lies, her words are most likely truth. Subaru nods.

Subaru: "Right,"

Subaru: "Let's change the question. —Does another Lewes-san know the contents of the TRIAL Garfiel took in the tomb?"

Lewes: "—"

Subaru: "Silence in this situation only means 'yes'."

Of the Lewes Meyer duplicates, multiples existed of those for the representative of SANCTUARY, Lewes. This system where the Leweses played their role shifting by the day created a problem where the individual Leweses did not necessarily share absolutely all the same memories and experiences.

Four duplicates play the role of the representative Lewes. For argument saying that the four were demarcated as A, B, C, and D, then of course not all of A's memories for her activities over the day would transmit over to B, C, and D.

The day in question, where Garfiel challenged the TRIAL, failed, and Lewes dragged him out—the Lewes who saved Garfiel then was not the Lewes before Subaru now.

Subaru: "...When does the Lewes-san who knows about the TRIAL next show up?" Lewes: "—"

Subaru: "The Lewes-san who spoke to me yesterday outside the tomb said that she'd taken the TRIAL. With the rule where you can't lie in effect, that means her claim's true. If the rotation's daily... she next shows up in three days?"

In this situation where he cannot take his time, Subaru would rather avoid it end up being the latest date possible.

Lewes's mouth relaxes as she lets slip a sigh.

Lewes: "No, the me who took Gar-bo outter the tomb next shows up in two days. The mes who have and haven't gone in are on a two-by-two rotation."

She says, her expression one of exhaustion.

Chapter 89: Memories Of Snow

—Finished talking in secret with Lewes, Subaru walks through the forest alone.

He told her that he needed to think, and left her behind with the crystal. Faced with a girl of identical visage—and further, her original. How pensive a thing.

While Subaru's interest in all this is inexhaustible, he does not know how far he's okay to broach into the topic. But either way, the Lewes who Subaru just spoke with is on his side.

These four Lewes duplicates.

Going from his chat with Lewes, two duplicates have taken the tomb's TRIAL. Meaning there are two Leweses who have challenged the TRIAL.

Subaru suspects that it's the TRIAL-challenging Leweses who are giving Garfiel these suggestions.

With there being four duplicates, potential exists for their thinking to not be entirely uniform. Subaru's thought that the four Lewes were the same being, considering that they all play the role of the same single person, had backfired. They play the role of the same person, while simultaneously having their own differences in thought processes.

Meaning it wouldn't be strange, supposing that one Lewes had experienced something that the others hadn't, for her to diverge from the others in her opinions.

For expediency's sake, Subaru labels the four Leweses as Alpha, Beta, Theta, and Sigma. Leweses Alpha and Beta do not know about the TRIAL. Leweses Theta and Sigma do.

What he really wanted to do was label them in German as Eins, Zwei, Drei, but he couldn't come up with the fourth one and so the plan failed.

Anyway,

Subaru: "Thing is meeting Theta and Sigma will have to be at least two days from now..."

The timing for the Sizeable Hare to attack SANCTUARY—strictly speaking, the deadline for this is when large-scale snow magic entices the nearby Hares over, which will be in five days' time.

Being that he will not necessarily come up with a counter-plan immediately after having a talk with Lewes, this remaining time of three days offers no great leeway.

Garfiel will, at the end of the end, kill the villagers to keep SANCTUARY from being liberated. With how they're inciting him to do such a thing, it's nigh impossible that Sigma and Theta's ideas will be easily swayed. With consideration to the prospect of persuading them, the future ahead indeed looks dark.

Subaru: "But in exchange for the increase in obstacles... there's an opening for dealing with Garfiel, maybe? When I somehow persuade the two interfering Lewes-sans, that'll clear away the problem."

If Sigma and Theta are influencing Garfiel's violence, then persuading them is equivalent to clearing the Garfiel route. Being that Subaru sees no methods for working things out directly with Garfiel, this does present a glimmer of hope,

albeit a feeble and slight one.

Garfiel's strength presently is not only in standalone power, as he also holds the command right for 20 Lewes duplicates, the will-lacking ones excepted from the representative four.

These plain copies are a machine-like combat force who do not hesitate even in their own deaths, and Subaru has not very great means to counter it should Garfiel utilize them.

It's all beyond strict.

Leaving the sentimentalities aside, Subaru would still rather avoid conflict with Garfiel. This was already plainly understood, but to silence Garfiel with combat was impossible.

Should Garfiel, spurred on by Theta and Sigma and possessing the girls' command right, entirely and perfectly become their enemy, then Subaru's side's chances of winning would drop even further.

Subaru: "And with how dramatic I was in forming a contract with Roswaal, I can't fail. Not planning to either. Nevermind whether the insurance will work, when standing my ground I gotta do it by my own strength."

Subaru pulls his cheeks firm as they start inclining in a snivelly direction, shaking his head, scolding himself.

Subaru: "Either way, dealing with Leweses Theta and Sigma's gonna have to be improv. Could try having a shot with Garfiel to feel him out early, but... make that for later."

Exiting through the forest, Subaru returns to the village in SANCTUARY.

The sun has risen entirely, the residents and Arlam evacuees spurred into their daily activities around the settlement.

Subaru gives them glances as he passes, answering the occasional hellos with a wave of his hand, his legs carrying him solely to a spot separated from all the activity.

A spot just a little distant from both the village and the cathedral.

—To where she is staying, the bed of Emilia.

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—Close her eyes, and the memories of then come back vivid even now. White. A world of white.

In this land of absolute silver, the young Emilia walks alone.

—You can't remember this!

Cry out in silent voice, but little Emilia as she walks with head downcast does not hear.

She glances around the area forlornly—and with her hopes betrayed, downhearted, she walks trudging slow through the snow.

—Go back! Please! Don't do anything more!

Young Emilia exhales a white puff, then peering curiously at the mist expelled from her mouth. She takes breath out and out and out, over and over. Her only clothing is undergarments crafted from thin cloth, and a cloak-like garment to

robe her body wholly.

It is not really an outfit one would consider for passing time in a frigid world, but there's nothing to do about it.

After all, this is the first time Emilia has ever been in such a cold land or ever seen snow.

The world she knew was a forest abounding in warm light and verdancy, with not any resemblance to this realm buried entirely in snow and ice.

This surely-familiar place was showing an unknown face.

And this mystifies young Emilia, making her neglect to react in the way that she fundamentally should.

—No! Don't go further! Go back! If you don't, it'll...!

Plead enough to shred the throat, to destroy it, to spit blood, but young Emilia's legs do not stop. The voice still going fruitlessly unheard, heartlessly the girl's feet press forward.

Her gait as she traverses the unknown snowlands barefoot is pitiful.

Long lost any sensation of coldness or pain, her feet cut on the branches and rocks hidden beneath the snow, tracking out her trail in droplets of blood.

That she nevertheless veils her terror toward the unfamiliar world, forgetting her pain, as she earnestly presses ahead alone is for what purpose, exactly?

—Stop, please... I don't want to watch any more, please...

The pleading does not reach her. The wishes will go ungranted. These hopes, entirely obstructed. Though this reality is already known, even in dreams are the cruel facts pushed into spotlight. By manner of showing her past self, and her greatest mistake.

Emilia: “—hk”

Young Emilia's amethyst eyes, as if sighting hope beyond the murk of blinding snow, sparkle. What her gaze lands on is, to young Emilia's knowledge, the trunk of the tallest tree in the world. This great plant called the PRAYER TREE is a divine arbour for devoting prayers to unseen and holy things, a treasured and irreplaceable presence for everyone in the village.

Young Emilia, too, obstinately believed that just by touching the great tree's trunk, she could feel its tremendous blessings on her skin.

How reassuring for it must have been for Emilia in that moment, to see the arbour's gallant form exactly in its usual place.

How much a grace it must have been, that amidst a familiar landscape transmogrified into someplace unknown, that this tree kept preserving the everyday and usual.

Exhaling many puffs of white along the way, Emilia clumsily bounds for the arbour. The piled snowfall buries young Emilia to her knees, and so although the distance to the tree is not far, the girl trips times upon times, leaving imprints of herself in the pure snow.

Falling face-first multiple times, her nose red from the frost, Emilia finally reaches the root of the tree.

Her tense face relaxes slightly in relief. But even in this the cold petrifies her muscles rigid, and all it amounts to is a meagre twitch.

Emilia: “—?”

Young Emilia reaches for one of the roots of the tree, her expression one of having noticed something. She slides her hand over to arrive at the root, her fingertips freezing as she buries them into the snow to dig.

—Stop!!

She digs, and digs.

With full focus, and still spurred on by panicky impatience, young Emilia digs up the snow.

—Stop! Stop, stop stop stopstopstop! Rather not watch. Rather not remember.

Would rather look away, cover her eyes, block her ears, scream to shred the world apart. But her nonexistent face, nonexistent eyes, nonexistent ears, cannot be deceived.

Young Emilia's fingers touch something in the snow.

She slowly, by her own hands, takes that last portion of snow, and—

—STOP!!

...

.....

.....

???: “—You were beyond any help.” Emilia: “—”

???: “Proof of sin. Proof of corruption. Be cursed and cursed and cursed, and at the finality of your suffering...”

Emilia: “—”

???: “Die. —Witch-spawn.”

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???: “—Emilia? Emilia? Hey, you alright!?”

Emilia: “Au, e.. ah, suhba, rhu?”

Subaru shakes her shoulders, for Emilia to faintly open her eyes with a call of his name. She shakes her head in an attempt to level out her blurry consciousness. But,

Emilia: “Subaru, why are... you here?”

Subaru: "Do I need a reason to be? When it's your face, Emilia-tan, I could keep staring the whole night without ever getting bored."

Emilia: "Not that, I mean... um..."

Perhaps her consciousness has not cleared fully, for Emilia's response is still rather anxious.

In an attempt to dispel her unease, Subaru slaps his knees as he stands up and shoots her a smile.

Subaru: "Can't have you getting too unguarded around me. Happy for the trust, but I'm a guy and also sheltering a ravenous wolf beneath the shroud called rationality. Would like it for you to be a little more conscious of this person I am, Emilia-tan."

Emilia: "...? I'm not forgetting about you, Subaru. I was waking up so I said something strange, that's all... but, dozing off without even noticing it..."

Though it seems she didn't exactly understand what he was saying, that Emilia's voice shows signs that she is properly waking up. After confirming this, Subaru gives the troubled-looking Emilia a jerk of his chin.

Subaru: "I get having the exhaustion piled up, but if you're gonna sleep do it proper on a bed. You sleep on the floor like you were then, and the moment I step in the room my heart's gonna be near to stopping."

Emilia: "...Ah, I'm sorry. It worried you, didn't it?"

Subaru: "I'd just renewed my resolve, but seeing this and wondering if a new event'd triggered that'd ruin absolutely everything seriously had me in a panic. You could even say that seeing your sleeping face today, Emilia-tan, was more emotional than usual."

The shock that struck Subaru when he entered the bedroom and saw Emilia is a thing beyond any possible description.

No reply came when he knocked, so he entered the room while considering that she may be elsewhere, to find Emilia collapsed in front of the bed with her silver hair splayed across the floor. Surely nobody could blame Subaru for paling and almost falling to despair.

That said, the warmth of her body when he went to upright her, and the definite presence of her breathing and pulse immediately informed him that his worries were needless.

However,

Subaru: "If that were all it was I'd rather just let you keep sleeping like that, but... looked like you were having a crazy nightmare. Was it bad of me to wake you up?"

Sweat had covered sleeping Emilia's brow as Subaru held her in his arms, her expression horrifically pained, and body writhing. Subaru had experienced this before too, but there exist no means to flee from an agonizing nightmare. The only method to swiftly escape the pain is to be called from outside the dream.

Subaru had utilized said method. Emilia shakes her head.

Emilia: "Thank you for waking me up sooo much. I had a sort of... no, a really

bad dream, and... thank you.”

Subaru: “Terrible dream, tormenting Emilia-tan. What was it about? ...is kinda sorta where I wanna go, but smells like remembering it'd be no fun either.”

Emilia: “—”

Seeing the wry smile following her silence, Subaru considers the nature of Emilia's nightmare. Most likely it had spawned from the piling of negative circumstances. While he can't tell whether or not any concrete images accompanied that,

Subaru: “...Right, then I won't push you say it.”

Seeing how Emilia averts her gaze from Subaru and avoids alluding to it at all, Subaru judges that it probably was a nightmare with clear, definite images.

If it was a vague dream, it'd be easy to talk about. That she can't is the evidence that her nightmare carried vivid form.

This talk with Emilia's turned to look inauspicious, and carrying the flow of the coming conversation is also going to be difficult.

His expression complex, touching the tip of his nose, deliberating on how to broach the topic is Subaru, who Emilia looks up at.

Emilia: “So... what's wrong, Subaru? You couldn't possibly have really come here to look at my face for no reason, right?”

Subaru: “Couldn't possibly—is not how surprising a thing it'd be, to my

thoughts.”

Emilia: “No, you wouldn't. I mean, you're always so busy going everywhere doing things. You can't use up your time like that just on me.”

Subaru: “Just how diligent a guy am I in your internal imaginings, Emilia-tan? You do get that I'm a guy known as such a slacker that I'd wholeheartedly agree to the establishment of Blobout Day?”

No exaggeration and no joke, Subaru knew that his nature was that of a hopeless layabout. An endless descent into depravity, if gone without some kind of role, was the human being called Natsuki Subaru.

Which is why he had not slacked on devoting himself to daily workouts and pointless skills/hobbies back in the old world. He knew he would become an utterly hopeless human being the moment that he did.

—You cannot call someone who puts in persistent effort—even without any goal—a slacker, but Subaru had not realised that obvious fact.

Emilia's gaze compounds in its slight warmth, perhaps wanting to say something about Subaru's underestimation. Her reaction prompts Subaru to furrow his brows, but ultimately Emilia goes on without saying anything.

Emilia: “It's fine. Anyway, come on tell me why you came here. And huuuuuurrryyyyyy”

Subaru: “No idea what's with the sudden childishness but... ah, okay right. I was thinking if we could go have a walk outside as a refresher...”

Emilia: “—”

Subaru: "...wouldn't really be a refresher at all actually." Subaru scratches his head as he senses his screwup.

Inferable by how her bed is set up in a spot separated from the village, Emilia's treatment in SANCTUARY is nothing good.

While the residents of SANCTUARY and Emilia should have a nice relationship, being that they are fellow peoples who stray from their fundamental racial bloodlines, it seems like yes indeed the negative image around half-elves is a special case.

It goes for the Arlam evacuees, too. The achievement for their successful escape from the Witch Cult belongs to Subaru, and does not directly improve opinions of Emilia.

Emilia's treatment in SANCTUARY is identical to her treatment in the Capital, that of a tumour.

She acted stalwart when with Subaru, but that didn't mean she was comfortable. Just how did she deal with the gazes on her when she was by herself?

Being that the situation still has not improved, bringing Emilia outside would just place an unnecessary burden on her.

Subaru: "It's because of this stuff that I'm just so..."

Aggravated at his own thoughtlessness, Subaru punches himself in the forehead.

His feelings switch gears with the pain of knuckles to brow. Subaru turns back to face Emilia properly, her eyes wide from his stunt.

Subaru: "Emilia."

Emilia: “—Mm.”

Seeing how Subaru's expression changes, Emilia senses that the atmosphere has shifted. She fixes her posture, gazing back at Subaru with her amethyst eyes full of quiet calm.

Her attitude and expression inform Subaru of the pointlessness of broaching the topic in a roundabout manner. What exactly to say? He puzzles over his opening line for only an instant.

Subaru: “Do you feel like talking with me about what you saw in the TRIAL?”

—Subaru plainly does see the terror and anguish in those wetting, amethyst eyes.

Chapter 90: —i'm Sorry

—Though he had supposedly firmed his resolve, the moment that Subaru witnesses the waves of emotion in her teary eyes, Subaru realises that a horrendous sense of regret is accosting him.

That one sentence had been him tearing at the scab over Emilia's mental scars. He had used concern as his justifiable reason for clawing at her unhealed wounds.

Subaru, too, feels the keen and phantasmal pain that she does.

Subaru: "The tomb's TRIAL shows you the past... that's what I've heard from everybody." Emilia: "—hk"

But nevertheless, in search of what lies beyond that pain, Subaru intrudes deeper.

A tremor flashes through Emilia's expression as she bites her lip, but her trembling pupils regardless keep Subaru in their gaze.

Subaru was for now abstaining on any report that he himself had taken the TRIAL. He beat it and so Emilia can beat it too—was the kind of rash remark that he couldn't make, and most importantly his qualifications had been revoked. It wouldn't be strange for it to seem like a consoling lie.

If that's what things are going to turn into, then what he has to do instead is just communicate his sincere thoughts about Emilia.

Subaru: "And that's why I think you had to retreat. Agonizing and ruminating, keeping all of it to yourself... and I know you're going to attempt the TRIAL again tonight, in that state."

Emilia: “—”

In these four repeated worlds, the details of her TRIAL had Emilia neglecting to rely completely on Subaru. Part of that was because Subaru had been basically ignoring her challenge right by determining there no necessity for her to take it, and part of it was because Emilia had no opportunities to be open about it with Subaru.

The former problem has been resolved by the fact that only Emilia can challenge the TRIAL now, and the second problem is ideally getting resolved right now here in this instant.

Emilia's cheeks are stiff as she casts her gaze down.

Faced with how her eyes and their long lashes are perfectly avoiding him, Subaru continues. Subaru: “But, still.”

Emilia: “—”

Subaru: “Could you let me carry some of the heavy baggage on your shoulders? If you have a past you're afraid to look back on, could you let me stand at your side as you challenge it?”

The downward tilt of her neck stops still as she timidly looks back up at him.

Her eyes must not reflect any vision of a weak or uneasy Subaru. He puffs out his chest, accepting her gaze with entirely baseless, abounding confidence.

Bluffing and baseless confidence, Subaru's great specialities.

Subaru: “Thinking back on it, Emilia, I still don't know anything about you. I like you. And that's partly because your looks're crazy to my taste, and that substance of yours I've touched in our time together drives me wild.”

Emilia: “—”

Subaru: “And so I can say chest held high that I like the you you are now. But when it's about what you experienced, what you've thought, what you've considered before you were the present you... I don't know anything. Because I didn't think I'd need a chance to know. Because the present and future're more important than the past. ...But.”

Emilia: “...But?”

Subaru: “Now we're in a place where you have to look back on your past, and if you're saying you're scared to be there alone... would you please qualify me to challenge this inbetween you need to face, the everything that spurred the present you, alongside you?”

Since his qualifications to suffer the hardships in Emilia's place have been revoked.

In this situation, Subaru wants the qualifications to support Emilia from beside her, to let her lean on him, when she is exhausted and near to collapse.

It might only amount to temporary peace of mind, but surely there exists an instant where that temporary relief will give her heart ease.

Emilia: “—”

Subaru waits intently for Emilia's reply.

The wavering of her eyes communicates her intense ambivalence. Hesitation and indecision, guilt and self-hatred. The varied emotions rage inside Emilia's thin body, in voracious frenzy.

Quietly, Emilia eventually,

Emilia: "Y-your being here is... you're already helping me just by being there for me, and so... just, causing more trouble for you isn't..."

Subaru: "I don't think the trouble you cause is any trouble at all. Being able to do something for you is happiness for me. When you're worried, and want someone to offer you their hand, I want to be the first one reaching out to help you."

Emilia: "—hk"

Again he reports it to Emilia, who weakly attempts to avoid Subaru's proposal.

So long as Emilia keeps from any serious refusals, Subaru has no intentions of withdrawing. He knows that he's intruding into topics she doesn't want to talk about. Half-hearted assertions aren't going to shake him.

It was not with such a low par of resolve that he forced a contract on Roswaal. Further conflicted, Emilia shuts her eyes firm, drooping her head.

Emilia: "Subaru..."

Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "Subaru, is your belief in me..."

The words that should come next do not leave Emilia's mouth. Before they can happen, her purity stops her from uttering the unfair statement.

She commits nothing so intrinsically disgraceful as doubt the faith of somebody appealing to her with sincerity.

The complacency Subaru had once forced on Emilia, instead, was exactly such a deed.

Emilia's mentality, holding her words despite being cornered, is something of dignity.

And so Subaru does not question her back or bring the subject up. Emilia's shoulders slump, regretting of her statement.

Emilia: "...Tell me what you want to ask, Subaru." Subaru: "..."

Emilia: "If I'm the one saying it, the story will just turn into a mess. ...So you be the one to ask it, Subaru."

Subaru: "...Are you okay with this?"

Emilia: "—Mm. I think that this is another one of my TRIALS."

Emilia speaks in surrender, her smile fleeting. For a moment, Subaru is lost for words.

He shakes his head to compose himself, pointing at the bed to indicate a shifting of placement. Subaru: "Anyway, this might wind up being a long talk, so how about we sit?"

Emilia: "...We should."

Fixing her posture, Emilia seats herself on the bed. Subaru pulls over a chair, sitting to face Emilia straight-on.

Emilia smooths out the wrinkles in her clothes as she waits for Subaru to

speak.

Having reached the crucial scene, Subaru hesitates for a scant few seconds on what best to ask first, before coming up with words.

Subaru: "What was the past you saw in the TRIAL like, Emilia? Going by what I've heard from someone who's taken it, it's... like, something like memories of your regrets."

Subaru asks his question, picking his words so that she won't notice he's experienced it.

The first TRIAL is facing your past. But that doesn't mean the past that Subaru saw was an event that had actually happened. It was a fresh theatrical production with his old guilt and his family, symbols of his regret, as the stage.

So just what was the TRIAL like for Emilia? Emilia licks her dry lips, wetting them.

Emilia: "The... the past I saw, was... probably, a memory from before my sleep." Subaru: "—? Before your sleep?"

Emilia: "Yes, before my sleep. The memory's vague, and pretty unclear, but... I was still little in it, so it has to be."

Emilia closes her eyes as she searches her memory, Subaru confused at her confession.

He could understand the meaning of 'I was little'. Probably the TRIAL was a past from when she was young.

But, 'before my sleep'—that was one Subaru couldn't understand.

Subaru: "Hold on. What does 'before my sleep' mean? It's not like going to sleep normally at night."

Emilia: "No, it's not. Before my sleep means... before I went to sleep inside ice, inside a giant tree in the forest. It's from so, sooo long ago."

Subaru: "Inside ice... Emilia, what?"

The context is so lacking that he could nigh suspect she's making it hard to understand on purpose. But regardless, Subaru's imagination brandishes its chilled claws, scratching them down his spine. Chest thumping in panicky impatience, Subaru maintains his calm the best he can.

Subaru: "Please answer, Emilia. What does 'inside ice, inside a giant tree' mean?" Emilia: "...Exactly what it sounds like."

Subaru: "—"

After a beat, Emilia informs Subaru.

Emilia: "I was frozen along with the tree the whole time. Puck finding me and bringing me out came so, sooo... much later."

※ * * * * * * * * * *

???: <—I finally found you.>

—Whos there?

???: <Sorry, I'm sorry. I am so sorry for leaving you alone. I've been searching

forever. Always, always, always searching for you.>

—Where am I? Its so, cold.

???: <I'll get you out right away. By herself, in this lonely place... why'd she have to go through... why, for such a long time did I...>

—But who are you? Whyre you crying?

???: <—Because you're the most darling thing there is. I'm so happy we could meet again.>

—Youre glad we met?

???: <Yes. I was... I was reborn for the sake of meeting you.>

—Who are you?

???: <I'm... I'm your biggest ally. I'm your number one, strongest ally.>

—So, youre my...

???: <—Yes. Yes. From today on, I'm your family. From this very single second on, you'll never be alone again. —And that I pledge.>

—Really? Thats...

＊＊＊＊＊＊＊＊＊

Emilia: “—It made me sooo happy.”

Hand to her chest, Emilia reminisces on the joyous time. Subaru feels his mouth rapidly turning arid as he listens on.

Emilia, who slept inside the ice.

The Prayer Tree, present in her homeland. Emilia spend her time there, frozen alongside its trunk, until Puck saved her.

But just how long a time was—?

Subaru: “Emilia. Is it safe to think that this place you lived in was Elior Forest? The one which's been frozen for a long time, the range of it gradually spreading?”

Emilia: “Mn, it is. By the time I woke up, they were calling it the Forest of Ice. —But it was a green place with bright sunlight before my sleep, when I was living there with everybody, and it never snowed.”

Subaru: “Green's... no actually, who's everybody?”

Subaru only knows snippets about the place. The before and after of Elior Forest is unknown to him. He asks about something else.

Emilia: "Everybody's everybody. Who I lived with in the forest's community... all the elves." Subaru: "The elves... then, your family was there too? Your mom and dad... maybe siblings, too." Emilia: "—"

Seeing how Emilia's eyes fill with melancholy, Subaru again senses that his momentum has led him to screw up.

Emilia must have said it at some point before. That Puck was her parent surrogate, and the entirety of her family.

He was supposed to have known that Emilia had lost her family in some fashion. Subaru: "I'm sor... I didn't mean..."

Emilia: "It's okay. You're just worried for me. ...But my family wasn't in the forest. Everyone in the village was nice to me, and they'd smile at me, but... There was nobody in that forest I could call my blood family."

Subaru: "...When you say, was nobody. Do you mean your parents were...?" Emilia quietly shakes her head.

She fiddles with the ends of her braid, distracting herself.

Emilia: "They were both gone by the time I was self-aware. Back then, I didn't really think it was strange. ...I did have someone who was like my mom. She was sooo kind, and strong, and cool... I had her."

Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "But she, and everybody... when I fell asleep, they all fell asleep too. Even now, in the woods of Elior Forest, there are many people still asleep and unwaking."

Subaru: "—Wha!?"

Emilia speaks dispassionately, as if tasking herself to state only the facts. The information prompts Subaru's throat to spasm, but Emilia pays that no mind as she continues.

Emilia: "After I woke up, me and Puck watched over everybody sleeping. So that someday, when people woke up like I did, they wouldn't go without knowing anything... always, I was there."

Subaru: "...Hold up a second."

The information load in this is dense, and Subaru's brain is struggling to keep up and put it all in order.

What on earth happened in Elior Forest, on the day Emilia first saw snow?

Subaru: "From what I know, Elior Forest froze... right, I think a little over 100 years ago. I heard that at the Royal Selection's court or somewhere before."

Emilia: "Mm. I was sooo surprised too, when I started studies at the mansion and learned it."

Subaru: "Meaning you were there when Elior Forest first froze, yeah? Do you know how it happened?"

Emilia: "—No, I don't." Emilia shakes her head.

Subaru's brows furrows. She looks down, her expression pained.

Emilia: "I really don't. My memories on what happened back then aren't clear. I just remember that I was little, and I was incredibly scared. But because I just kept sleeping forever, those memories are fuzzy too..."

Subaru: "The word 'little's come up a few times now, but around how old were you exactly?" Emilia: "...I think probably, I was seven."

Subaru: "Seven... It's safe to count elf years the same way as humans, right?"

Emilia nods.

You count elf ages normally, increasing by one with the passing of each year. Elves are renowned as a long-lived race, and half-elf Emilia would be the same. But that said, the long-lived elves too have a childhood period, and seven-year-old young Emilia was beyond any blame.

Though, with some simple math this means that Emilia's current age is $7 + \geq 100$.

Subaru: "Age gap's nothing to worry about this late. Being anxious about that turned pointless the moment she was someone from a parallel world."

Emilia: "...Subaru, what's wrong? Was there something funny I..."

Subaru: "Nope, nope. Just thinking that man you and me do have an age gap."

Alongside him organizing his thoughts and shifting the mood, Subaru jokes around to adjust the atmosphere. Although she most likely has not figured Subaru's intentions, Emilia's tense cheeks do relax somewhat as she gives a small sigh.

Emilia: "We do,"

Emilia: "But because the time I spent unconscious and asleep was so long, I'm

not really confident I'm matured to my real age..."

Subaru: "Really? Don't exactly know how fast Elf aging goes, but if you can use humans as a framework then I'd say you're plenty matured."

Subaru stares nonchalantly at Emilia on the bed as he snorts at her worries.

Her limbs are fully grown, and her body hosts the curvature of womanhood. Her gloomy, amethyst eyes and uncertain features prominently give her a mysterious beauty, crossing to and fro over the threshold between girl and woman.

Emilia was plenty enough femininely matured.

But it seems like Subaru's thoughts diverge just a bit from what Emilia's worried about. Emilia: "No,"

She shakes her head.

Emilia: "The ice I slept in didn't stop time, it just put my consciousness to sleep. So, my body kept maturing even inside the ice. The way I had to move my body was different than from before my sleep, and for a while after I woke up, I made so many mistakes."

Subaru: "This ice... right, so it had that drawback."

Her body had been that of a seven year old, and the change to a fully-grown adult upon awakening must have been chaotic.

It's common in anime and manga for children to have their bodies mature suddenly into an adult's, but surely the adaptation couldn't be that easy. A consequence where their brain wasn't meshing to their body correctly and they suffered terrible distress like Emilia was natural.

Emilia: "Roswaal took me out of the forest, I studied outside... and I learned that I'd slept for nearly 100 years, which shocked me sooo much. I couldn't believe I'd slept that long."

Subaru: "Saying you just age normally inside it, if it'd been a race that wasn't long-lived like elves trapped in the ice it'd be all ove..." r, is what he means to say, when he gets the feeling that he has just heard an incredible truth. Closing his eyes, Subaru quietly puts the numbers together in his head. He calculates, adds and subtracts, and after recalculating it several times to confirm, his confusion morphs into definite suspicion.

Subaru: "So hey, Emilia... you just said you slept for almost 100 years, right?"
Emilia: "I did, yes...?"

Subaru: "And you were about seven before your sleep, right?" Emilia: "I was. Subaru, what are..."

Subaru: "Emilia. How much time's passed since Puck woke you up?"

From what Subaru's heard, Roswaal bringing Emilia out of the forest happened about half a year ago. Which means Emilia lived with Puck in Elior Forest until then. The problem here is the time it took between her sleep, waking, and meeting Roswaal.

Her expression still complex, Emilia puts her finger to her lip. Emilia: "...Maybe, six or seven years... I think."

Subaru: "—"

Hearing this answer, Subaru's suspicion morphs into absolute conviction. This uncovered truth races tremors down Subaru's body.

Seven years since birth, up to one hundred years asleep, seven years since waking. Which meant the following:

—Emilia was around 107 years old. She looked 18 years old. And mentally, she was 14 years old. Subaru: “Real, physical, mental age... none are synced up...”

Possible and happening only because she is an elf, a threeway discrepancy between ages. This coincided with many questions Subaru had about Emilia's behaviour up to now.

Subaru found her rather ignorant to flattery for an over-century-old elf, he couldn't deny the sense of inexperience she had with others, which was disproportionate to her appearance, and the cuteness of her occasionally childlike attitudes and behaviour did stand out.

All of it was a negative side effect from having spent the majority of her life inside the ice. Subaru: “Fourteen... she's no different from Felt...”

Why did this girl have to shoulder such a great responsibility? His irritation for the Royal Selection, and for Roswaal, steadily compounds.

Reflecting on how the topic he had brought up to distract the mood had entirely derailed, Subaru cuts into another—related—subject.

Subaru: “You said before you don't know why the forest was frozen. So what's it you're seeing in the TRIAL? That fuzzy... memory of before the freezing, that's what you're seeing, yeah?”

Emilia: “...I think so. The scenery is almost definitely from before my sleep... and I think the memory really did happen.”

Subaru: "And so if the memory's scary as it is, then yeah it's gonna be that some crazy something came around to freeze you and the other elves, which you're unconsciously rejecting so..."

Emilia: "—Wrong."

Subaru: "Well I mean, there's not gonna be anything scarier than that, is there. The TRIAL shows you your biggest regret. Which means what you're seeing's..."

Emilia: "I told you that you're wrong!"

Emilia shouts, her yell destroying Subaru and his unwittingly zealous theory.

She immediately blinks, regretting that she yelled, but then closes her eyes to dispel her hesitation. Her eyes water as she faces Subaru.

Emilia: "What I... saw in the TRIAL, wasn't that. I didn't see that. ...What I, saw was..." Subaru: "E-Ehmil..."

Emilia: "—Witch's Spawn."

A chill sharp as an icicle spears through Subaru's spine.

Emilia buries her face in her hands, hiding her face. Her voice rings quiet, emotionless.

Emilia: "Seed of Disaster. Silver Wretch. Life Best Unborn. Font of Hatred. Unforgivable Soul. Devil. —Witch-Child."

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “Everyone who was nice to me, who smiled at me, then in that cold snow said these things about me, and...”

Emilia's limbs—her body—trembles.

Emilia: “I was in the ice for what came after, and I don't remember. But everybody must remember even now in the ice that they cursed me. Because I've always, always been bearing that curse still.”

Subaru: “—”

Emilia: “I wanted to free everyone from the ice... and apologize.”

Emilia with her face in tears is not here. She looks up, at them, before quietly bowing her head.

Emilia:

“I'm sorry for causing you trouble. —Everybody, I love you.”

1 The term I'm translating as 'Witch-Child' is 魔女の娘 in Japanese, which can mean either 'Daughter of a Witch' or 'Young Girl Who Is a Witch'. Though my instinct says it's 9:1 odds the former, it's not perfectly clear which. So here is my compromise.

Chapter 91: False Sleep

As he hears the weeping in Emilia's words, a stabbing feeling of regret assails Subaru. Having made Emilia recollect a sad memory, and even brought her to tears, the guilt spears him in multitudes.

What Subaru feels from Emilia's faltering speech is her love and gratitude for the people of Elior Forest. Feelings which the day of snow had flipped entirely, transforming these memories into ones of being subjected to hatred and malice.

It's unclear what they all thought while trapped inside the ice. But Emilia's days of warmth and happiness have nevertheless been sealed inside the thick, cold frost, with no signs at all of it melting.

Subaru: "...Why did they say those things about you? Just going off what I've heard here, for the one who buried the forest in ice... to be you would make sense. But were you powerful enough to cause something that insane when you were little?"

Emilia: "—I don't know. Back then I knew way less of the world than I do now, and I knew nothing about what I could or couldn't do, and I was always imposing on everybody's kindness. But... without Puck and by myself, the current me doesn't have the powers to freeze a forest."

Subaru: "If you had Puck, could you?" Emilia: "—"

Emilia wordlessly gives a small nod.

Her half-hearted affirmation was probably because she feared Subaru would mistake her for the culprit behind freezing the forest. But Subaru doesn't think that way.

Not out of favouritism, but a simple problem of timeline.

Subaru: "Don't need to look so worried, I'm not gonna misunderstand. You met Puck ages after the Forest'd been frozen... like, after 100 years. You and the ice and Puck are backwards in the sequence."

Emilia: "M-mm... yes, but..."

Emilia nods, her face too tense to really be called 'relieved'.

While withstanding the urge to furrow his brow at that reaction, Subaru instructs himself to keep his expression calm as he links his hands together.

—There's been something faintly off about this the whole time. But it was here in this instant that Subaru felt more intensely uncomfortable than ever.

Well of course. Natsuki Subaru had never trespassed into Emilia's past or inner thoughts before, and had been content to love her while coddling her superficial traits like a princess.

And so this was a TRIAL for Subaru, one essential for him to undergo.

A TRIAL to determine whether a Subaru disqualified from the tomb had the right to stand with, beside, and alongside Emilia.

Subaru: "I understand the things about what you saw in the tomb's TRIAL. ...And so going conversely, what do you think you have to do that'll beat it?"

Emilia: "That's... mm, it's..."

Emilia averts her gaze. This was not her hesitating about giving a solution, but

her failing to find the precise form and structure of the thing.

Emilia had no definite visions on how to defeat the TRIAL. Her first attempt had abruptly presented her again with her long-held quandary, and sought that she present a flawless response.

Echidna said that giving your answer regarding the past that you avoided is enough to defeat the TRIAL.

Affirmation of it, denial of it, either would work to surmount it.

Emilia had accepted as a sad memory the fact that those once kind to her now rejected her. Then, getting over it would be the requirement for beating the TRIAL?

Getting over the stuff you have deserted to your past—how to do it, and how to clear it.

Subaru cannot present Emilia with a definite answer. But, having overcome the first TRIAL and experienced the second, there are things Subaru does know. And although his scrapes with the character of the one called Echidna were minute, he does know this:

—Most likely, the TRIAL would not present the challenger with an unbeatable problem. And of course it wouldn't, when considering Echidna's goals.

What Echidna desires is the treasures so called results, to sate her curiosity. Were they acquired by defeat of the TRIAL, then that only made them shine brighter. So should be what the witch is thinking.

The results are merely a question of whether the challenger affirms or denies the past.

Meaning that Emilia was meeting the requirements to clear the TRIAL. So long as she can figure out said requirements, and present her thoughts about her

past, then that should be her solution.

So then the problem here is not with the TRIAL, but with—

Subaru: “You can keep challenging without having found any answer for it, but it's gonna always turn out the same.”

Emilia: “—What do you think, Subaru?” Subaru says nothing.

Emilia: “This talk we've had, about my past and the TRIAL... having heard it, what do you think? Do you have any ideas for what might work? I'm still wondering what I should do...”

Emilia must have spent last night, even after returning to her lodgings, it eating into her sleeping hours, repeating these questions to herself.

In a debilitating vortex of thought, which ended in her losing consciousness in something close to fainting.

Subaru: “Emilia, you said that you want to melt the ice and thank everyone.”

Emilia: “Mm.”

Subaru: “Why do you think like that?”

Emilia must have sustained terrible treatment from these once-kind people.

Why did she find significance in saving those men and women, drowned in the ice?

Subaru: “The last memories you have are memories of them rejecting you, right? They said awful things, jeered at you... why do you still want to help them?”

Emilia: “—Subaru, if I said awful things about you right now, would you stop trying to help me?” Subaru: “—”

Subaru finds himself speechless.

Emilia's amethyst eyes stare back at Subaru with sincerity. The indecisive weakness is gone from her gaze in that answer.

Emilia: “Yes, the last feelings I felt while with everybody were painful... but what happened at the end doesn't erase all the time I spent with them before that. I had so many good memories of my time with them.”

Subaru says nothing.

Emilia: “I don't want to forget them, and invalidate everything by only remembering them hurting me. I want to help everyone, and smile with them again... it's greedy, but that's what I think.”

Emilia puts her hand to her mouth after finishing her unwitting speech, peeping at Subaru to see his response.

Her expression is one of having unintentionally voiced an ugly part of herself, and fearing being scorned because of it, is how Subaru perceives it.

Seeing Emilia's perceived worry, Subaru thinks:

—So her way of life is one where she cannot go without finding that wish greedy. Emilia: “—Subaru?”

Subaru: “Nothing, just thinking. That you're exactly, entirely right, that is.”

Even saying that he was killed by them in his last interaction, that doesn't

make the memories and ties between them fade.

He had been killed by both Rem and Ram, but he still worked frantically to save them. And he ran off the same feelings during the loops starting in the Capital.

Emilia thought in the same manner as Subaru. That's all.

Subaru: “—”

The instant after he feels the relief, Subaru becomes conscious of the greatest sense of awriness yet. Something so off, that he's shocked at how he hadn't already noticed it.

Emilia: “—Subaru?”

His face frozen stiff, Emilia's eyes waver in confusion as she looks at Subaru. While he knows this is unsettling her, he cannot really pull himself back together. Because,

—Emilia has already reached her answer regarding the event in her past.
Subaru: “—”

The elves Emilia spent her days with are sleeping in ice in Elior Forest. She has reminisced on that day of snow, and although the target of her once-trusted ones's hatred, she fully asserted that she wanted to save them and convey them her gratitude.

That was a single and definite reply to her aversive past.

If Subaru's recognition of his past self's foolishness and communication of his

goodbye to his parents was enough to meet the conditions to defeat the TRIAL, then Emilia's determination should be equally respected.

But the TRIAL is not willing to recognize that she has filled the conditions.

While perhaps that could be because Subaru jolted her awake and interrupted her TRIAL, on all days after that for every loop—even when Subaru does not interrupt her TRIAL, she fails to defeat it.

So Emilia's answer was not apt for the TRIAL? Subaru: “But, that's...”

If the one making the ruling during the TRIAL is Echidna, then is its liking with the presented answer dependant on the witch's feelings with it? But, Echidna's emphasis is not on what kind of answer is given, and instead on the fact that one is given at all.

Invalidating the challenger's answer does not seem anything like Echidna. Nothing like her—but Subaru does have the thought: if there's a possibility that Echidna disfavours only Emilia's answer...

It guilts him to recognize the thought.

Recognizing it means speculating that ONLY EMILIA is entirely incapable of defeating the TRIAL. Subaru: “Like I could accept that... begging you, Echidna.”

Emilia: “Subaru, what's wrong? Did I say something strange again?”

Subaru: “No, it's not a problem with you. If there's some problem then it's with the question-setter. ...You said you want to melt the ice and help everyone, but you weren't able to? You lived in the forest with Puck until Roswaal brought you out, right? You must've had plenty of time to try.”

Although aware that it's a cruel question, Subaru asks it.

Being that he's heard Emilia's past, then attempting such a thing and unsealing them from the ice would mean the freed people would again shower

Emilia in curses.

Emilia must have already worried about this exact thing many times over. Her nails dig into her arm as she looks down.

Emilia: "I had Puck help me for it so many times... but I couldn't melt the ice."

Subaru: "When you say couldn't melt the ice, do you mean a mental problem? Or a physical one..." Assuming that it's a mental problem, then Subaru has no intention to fault her for it.

Doing something while knowing that it will hurt oneself is not an action anyone is so easily capable of.

But Emilia replies to Subaru's question with a weak, Emilia: "A physical problem, maybe."

Emilia: "The ice is special ice... it's not something that will melt, even if you do what you can from outside. You have to do something about the person who froze them, or try some other great method... and so I accepted Roswaal's offer, and..."

Subaru: "Offer?"

Emilia: "Auh..."

Emilia covers her mouth, her expression one of having said something that she shouldn't.

But faced with Subaru as he focuses his stare on her in silence, Emilia's shoulders immediately droop.

Emilia: "Roswaal... promised me." Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "He came with the insignia, let me hold it... and once he saw its jewel

glow red, he told me about the Royal Selection, and then... he said this."

So was Emilia's presence in the forest, qualified to be a Royal Selection candidate as she was, information written in the gospel?

An exchange which brings to mind the image of Roswaal smiling cryptically—in this imagining, Roswaal speaks as he presents Emilia his hand:

Emilia: “—If you can secure the throne, then surely your wish to melt the ice of this forest can also be granted.”

Subaru: “...You believed him?”

Emilia: “I was pretty desperate. He didn't tell me the details of how to melt the ice, but... I accepted his offer, and left the forest with Roswaal. Puck... doesn't object to what I do, so he came with me without saying anything.”

Subaru: “And that's why you decided to participate in the Selection... when you said before that your reason for participating's selfish... that's what it was, then.”

Emilia: “...Contempting me, right?”

In his heart Subaru agrees with her, when Emilia murmurs.

He looks up, to find her gazing at him timidly, and her lips quirk.

Emilia: “The others... everybody has amazing goals and resolve for contending in the Selection, and my reason is so, sooo much of a personal problem...”

Subaru: "I'd say it's plenty important, wanting to save the villagers. The quantity of people you help doesn't dilute the greatness of what you do. And besides, the stuff you said at the Selection's hall wouldn't've been a lie."

Emilia: "What I said at the hall for the Selection..."

Subaru: "That you wanted to be viewed as equal. I don't think those words were a lie."

At the start, maybe it was her seeking some solution for her unresolved circumstances. But Emilia learned of the outside world, learned the largeness of 100 years of time, and was still learning the ways of the present world, surely giving her chance to rethink.

Subaru did not feel that the words she spoke at the Selection Hall were insincere, superficial varnish.

If her feelings then were earnest, and her desire to win the Selection remained the same now, then Subaru thought it no reason to entirely disdain it.

Subaru: "So you don't have to look so worried, it's okay. I'm on your side, and that you can lean on me hasn't changed from last night. Even if you say you're okay, and deny taking my shoulder."

Emilia: "Ah... um, about yesterday..."

Subaru: "Don't apologize, it'll ruin me. But well, what I can tell you is that I'm always gonna be right where you can lean on me, Emilia-tan, for thine anticipated use. I do like it when you stand strong by your own, Emilia, but it's perfectly fine for you to be a little weak for me too."

Subaru thumps his hand to his chest, letting his mouth relax, for Emilia to give a relieved sigh. Instantly, that relief seems to transmit down the rest of her as her upper body sways,

Emilia: "It's, just when I relax suddenly I'm..."

Subaru: "Your dream was so bad you couldn't sleep. Don't push yourself, have a little nap. I won't do anything just watch over you."

Emilia: "That 'won't do anything' is sort of bothering me sooo much..."

Although worried by the unneeded statement, Emilia's silver hair still sways as she fights the Sandman's temptations. Subaru puts his finger to her forehead, putting in some light force to so push her down.

Emilia: "Au..."

Subaru: "Don't worry, get to sleep."

Subaru unconsentingly finger-pushes her to lie face-up on the bed.

He draws the linens over her thin body, drawing his chair even closer to the bed, seating himself where he can observe Emilia's face as she sleeps.

Subaru: "If you're talked out, your head's ordered, and what I said relaxed you a little... then go have a nice rest. A time's gonna come again tomorrow night where you'll need to put in your best."

Emilia: "...Is it okay for me to be spoiled like this?"

Subaru: "It's perfectly okay. Keep getting spoiled. Your teeth're gonna rot with how intense my sweet pampering'll be."

Subaru gives a shrug, Emilia laughing quietly as she lies in bed. And she stares intently at Subaru, reaching her arm out from under the covers.

Emilia: "—Hand."

Subaru: "Hm?"

Emilia: "If you're going to spoil me, then... could you hold my hand? Just until I fall asleep, please?"

Subaru: "Oho, now leave that right to me."

Subaru grips her slender little hand, smiling as he feels its delicate, smooth touch on his palm. Emilia smiles back, closing her eyes in accordance with Subaru's words.

It does not take that long for her to start giving the quiet breathing of sleep.

Subaru: "...Really, hope you can have a good dream."

Watching Emilia as she lays quietly in bed, Subaru brushes her silver bangs from her forehead, dropping his gaze to their yet-linked hands.

If feeling someone else's presence like this could free her from her isolation in the dream, good. Leaving her to be plagued and plagued by painful nightmares,

alone in this room, would certainly be cruel.

Subaru: "But anyway... learned lots of stuff."

Adjusting his posture on his seat, still grasping her hand, Subaru ruminates over the details of their conversation.

Emilia's past, and why she's contending in the Royal Selection. Roswaal's proposal as he brought her out, and an Emilia so cornered that she had to accept said proposal.

And most importantly, the TRIAL facing Emilia, and its motives in not passing her when she has supposedly reached her answer—with the issues still lying incomplete, and having soothed Emilia to sleep, Subaru, now, was here.

Subaru: "—"

He glances down at Emilia's face as she sleeps.

Pained at her haggard state, Subaru had postponed on what to do—or not. He had put off acquiring essential answers and practically forced her to bed for a purpose.

His ideas were ones he likely would not be able to achieve at Emilia's side, with her still awake. Subaru: "But, thinking of the situation... this is all I can imagine."

The past loops, information that has tugged at him, and other circumstantial evidence had forced Subaru to consider this idea. There is only one way to confirm it, and that way is simple.

Should his idea be correct, then unmistakably it would be a glimmer of hope for breaking through this situation—

He holds his breath.

His heart thumps and his blood rushes loud as he reaches out his hand, seeking to confirm whether he is right.

His left hand, not the right which clutches Emilia's, reaches down to between her clavicles, down to the bottom of her slender, pale neck. And,

Subaru: “—You're not really damn sleeping at all.” A cold, hard touch at his fingertips.

Although feeling his voice strain as he speaks, the words do come out.

Then is a period of silence, and just when Subaru's heart starts blazing with panicked impatience—

???: <I'm impressed you noticed. —It makes me happy, Subaru.>

From inside the green stone at his fingertips, the spirit's androgynous voice echoes directly within Subaru's skull.

Chapter 92: A Lie

Puck: <It feels like it's been ages since we last talked like this.>

Subaru: <That's 'cause it's been... right, almost two weeks already since you disappeared. Your owner was going around looking for you, sad, and you were nowhere to be found.>

This sensation of words permeating directly into his skull, rather than through vibrations in the air, is a strange one. But regardless Subaru indeed perceives Puck's ever-lackadaisical voice, himself unable to keep from having his resentment seep into his reply.

How to deal with this situation where rather than being elated that he got his expected—or wished-for—reply, he is irritated? His bullheadedness was too intense for him to give Puck any earnest response.

Puck: <It looks like over the two weeks we've gone without talking, your anger for me escalated pretty bad.>

Subaru: <You know why, yeah? Don't make me have to say it.>

Puck: <Right. That thing I said before I stopped coming out... to the blue-haired girl, I've looked back on it, and it was pretty thoughtless of me. I've really reflected on it.>

Subaru: <...! That isn't what we're talking about!>

What's thoughtless is bringing up events which Subaru had already forgotten

his anger about. And to top it off it completely derails the conversation from what they ought to be discussing.

Puck responds to Subaru's outburst in a pouty tone, Puck: <Come on, don't be so mad...>

Puck: <I know that. I just wanted to apologize. Had to wonder, if we didn't settle the bad blood before getting into the main topic, whether we could really get too deep into each other. ...Since even in good times, I'm in a position where I have to request heaps of things from you.>

Subaru: <Okay, are you? If your self-satisfaction's all sated, then let's get on with the talk. You know, that one you want to have, about the main topic.>

Answering to Puck's apology with entirely superficial acceptance, Subaru pushes the talk forward as he glares at the crystal.

Its bright lustre reflects off Subaru's eyes, emitting a deep green glow from its place on Emilia's chest.

Subaru clicks his tongue.

Subaru: <Anyway, this situation's way too inconvenient for us to be talking in. We're going outside. It's not clear when Emilia could wake up. We'll change the setting, and...>

Puck: <I am sorry, but I can't do that. —Which counts as part of the main topic.>

Puck's thoughtspeech destroys Subaru's proposal as he looks down at the sleeping Emilia's face. The reply prompts Subaru to make an expression as if his nose has been pinched, just for a moment.

Subaru: <That wasn't a 'don't wanna', rejecting it. What do you mean by 'can't'?>

Puck: <Only what it sounds like. Outside the crystal, for me right now... or basically, materialising in the outside world is impossible for me right now. If it weren't, do you think I'd ever let Lia be this sad and alone?>

Subaru: <—>

Puck speaks as if he's saying something entirely natural. Subaru responds with mental silence. Considering everything that's happened between Subaru and the spirit until now, it's truth that, honestly, Subaru is on the verge of doubting how credible Puck's statements are.

But neverminding Puck's disposition where he's always a step too late when it matters, the fundamental part of him—that his presence is for Emilia's sake, and that he feels for Emilia, are not fabrication. Subaru considered those points alone ones which necessitated no doubt.

Subaru: <There's some circumstances, or reason... why you're not able to come outside.>

Puck: <That's right. I haven't even been able to talk in thoughtspeak, like this. So it's a great fortune that you suspected this and called out to the crystal. I doubt anyone else would've been able to secure this opportunity, you see.>

Subaru: <Anyone else... meaning?>

Puck: <It's very simple, the only one who'd want to get this close to Lia while she's unconscious'd have to be you. Then is the problem where even if you do

touch the crystal, whether you're compatible for the thoughts to communicate. But we've done this before in the Capital, and confirmed that you and me are connected with a pass for mental communication.>

Subaru: <...Thinking back, actually we did do that.>

Second time in the Capital, when having a private talk with Emilia, Puck and Subaru communicated in thoughtspeak like this.²

It's a replication of back then—and with its being secret from Emilia, even moreso a replication. Subaru: <So, what am I meant to do?>

Puck: <Hm?>

Subaru: <I purposefully figured the timing where someone'd to talk back to me, and in this crazy, divinely-touched situation I called out. You should've been prepared to not let this one-in-a-million chance get away. That being an opportunity with its short, limited time window, and the words and hints you need to communicate.>

Puck: <—>

2 Cut in the anime, occurs very early in arc 3.

Puck responds with a meaningful silence. Subaru manages to vividly imagine the unseen cat spirit grinning a wide and human-ish grin.

Betraying not Subaru's imaginings, Pucks laughs, his voice unable to conceal his delight.

Puck: <I really was right to expect things from you. Though that it frustrates me to think I have to entrust Lia to someone other than myself is the truth.>

Subaru: <...I can communicate what you're thinking to Emilia, if you want.>

The latter part of Puck's joyful statement comes laced with gloom, Subaru lowering his gaze. His proposal to Puck is ultimately nothing more than an idea for what might console him. But, having said it and considered it, it's also kind of genius.

Emilia had lost view of Puck, who supported the core of her heart, and was unsteady. While she was enduring it for now, with the passage of time and repeated failures of the TRIAL, she would be abraded and her weakness would reveal itself. If that's going to happen, then maybe it'd be better to show her some relief here, and—

Puck: <You better not. If she learns that I communicated with someone who wasn't her, in the worst cast scenario, Lia's mind could break.>

But Puck keeps Subaru from proceeding with the idea, his voice dejected.
Subaru: "Haah..."

Sighs Subaru.

Subaru: <So... what exactly do you mean with that?>

Puck: <Exactly what it sounds like I mean. Using you as an intermediary to convey my words to Lia means she'll find out that I'm not really sleeping in the crystal. For a Lia who is keeping me from exiting, and not allowing me to interact with anyone, her realising that I'm not actually silenced is liable to destroy her yet-precarious mental equilibrium.>

Subaru: <Wha, wait up a sec—!>

Subaru shakes his head as he slams the breaks on Puck's piling sentences.

With Puck presently lacking body, and only the crystal's sheen for Subaru to gaze on, Puck's expression is imperceptible. But going from Puck's tone, Subaru judges this no attempt at deception.

Subaru: <Do you realise what you said just now? That it's Emilia, that it's no one other than Emilia, who is stopping you from going outside, that's what you're saying.>

Puck: <...>

Subaru: <Sealing your mouth shut... what do you mean with that? When Emilia's calling for you, crying for your help, wailing and in tears... how can you! It's not me, not anyone else, but your name she calls when she's worn out! And how can you...!>

Puck: <...Ah, right. There's no one more frustrated at the fact that Lia won't rely first on you than you, Subaru.>

Subaru: <—hk!!>

The statement is one to change the topic on him, but the meaning it carries accurately divines to Subaru's core, his throat clamping with incomprehensible and violent emotion.

It's truth that Subaru has been acting while persistently wanting to be Emilia's number one. That the fact he cannot presently be Emilia's number one, is obstructing him, is also truth.

Another truth is that the one who occupied Emilia's #1 slot, this one who possessed far more power than Subaru, who although asserting that Emilia was in turn his own #1, was failing to take any action for her sake—was something Subaru loathed to a maddening extent.

And so then being told that the reason for this was not himself, not Puck, but in fact Emilia herself, of course he cannot simply believe it.

Subaru: <So, what? You're saying that Emilia breaking as she challenges the TRIAL, declining alone in suffering, smiling in tears as she remembers her sad past, all of it and everything, is a lie and a goddamn performance? —As if I could believe that!>

If those tears, those cries, those laments, everything had been a production to fool those around her, then Emilia's acting skills were natural genius. Rather than aiming for the throne, she should aim for being a universally-acclaimed actress.

If you ignore the obvious fact that Emilia lacks both that talent and any reason to deceive Subaru and the others, then that's what she should aim for.

Subaru: <That couldn't happen... Nevermind constantly lying to trick everyone around her, she gets crushed by guilt just over a tiny little lie. That's the type of girl Emilia is...>

Puck: <Subaru, calm down. I'm not speaking bad of Lia like your worst-case imaginations say. Now just calm down.>

Subaru: <Worst-case imaginations? What worst-case imaginations. Asshole, stop peeping into my head! That stuff and this stuff have nothing to do with each other. Even saying for instance that something does happen, I would never think of Emilia...hk>

Puck: <—NATSUKI SUBARU!>

Puck's sharp voice strikes an agitated, roiled Subaru

The intense emotion packed in the short call is enough to, for a moment, make Subaru's body tremble and freeze still. What Subaru's timid gaze lands on is not the visage of the small cat, but the inorganic glowstone sitting quietly at Emilia's chest.

Puck: <...Are you calmed down?>

Subaru: <...That voice was seriously you? My thought was you're always spaced out, ignoring the seriousness of the situation, being fluffy.>

Puck: <It's not really that often that I raise my voice. But when it's Lia... or for scolding a disobedient kid, then I can get loud.>

Subaru: <Disobedient kid, thanks.> Subaru gives a small sigh.

His failure to entirely deny Puck's words is because he recognize that his unsightly attitude had been problematic.

This was a long-awaited conversation, but Subaru had neglected multiple times to keep his calm during it. What time was he on now for Puck rebuking him, and getting the conversation back on track?

It's pathetic how he's unable to restrain himself. What he had yearned for constantly, a heart of metal. Subaru's interior, then, lacked even a single scrap

of the thing?

Puck: <But honestly said, I'm pretty thankful for your presence, with how emotional you get over Lia. You're surely giving Lia more than a little strength by her perspective, too.>

Subaru: <—wh>

Puck: <No one has stepped this far into Lia's truest thoughts before. Even Roswaal, who brought Lia out of the forest for her connection to the Selection, has gone without touching her ingrained, deeper nature. Though considering that that thing's goals are in doing something by putting Lia on the throne, and so concerned with something unrelated, I suppose it's not that surprising.>

Subaru: <—You know what Roswaal's goals are?>

Puck: <To follow the gospel, right? In that respect, he's perhaps a lot like Betty. Having things written, and having nothing written. Similar but different, is perhaps how to say it.>

It appears that Puck knew about Beatrice and Roswaal's circumstances in detail. While Subaru doubts the information has gotten to even Emilia, that doubt only makes him more unsettled about what Puck's thinking in keeping these factoids to himself.

But Subaru can imagine something for what Puck would say, should Subaru question him about it. Subaru: <It's unrelated to Emilia, so you took no initiative to act... then.>

Puck: <If there were anything I could do for Betty, then I would. And as for Roswaal... being that Lia's tied up in it, have to do something about it.>

Subaru: <This's the payback for putting this off and not talking about it when you damn well knew.>

Puck: <I have no defence. Though I do think it's bad of me that you've had to deal with said payback.>

Unrelated to any question of malevolence, it seems his lack of intention to prioritize anything

except Emilia had strong influence here. If this passive stance of his is what beckoned Emilia's present hardship, then this was a blunder far too large to simply laugh off as a trifling mistake.

Subaru: <I'm destroying Roswaal's plans so that one's fine for now. And about Beatrice... got no intention of leaving her to you. The only thing I'm conspiring about with you is Emilia.>

Puck: <That's fine. My strength isn't great enough right now to allocate it to anyone but Lia. Expending my best efforts into something other than my main preference, and so overlooking what's most important, would be cart and horse.>

Subaru: <Tell me. What does it mean that Emilia's keeping you from going outside? I don't think for even a single second that she's tricking everybody.>

Last time he had been running off emotion, but his ideas remain the same even now. While there's no conceivable way he could know everything of Emilia's inner heart, she is surely not someone who would deceive those

around her, and disregard their thoughtfulness.

A sensation transmits mentally of Puck practically giving a relieved sigh.

Puck: <You can relax, would be a statement hard to really assert. It's by Lia's will that I'm not going outside, but... it isn't that Lia's keeping me from going outside, while thinking to block me from going outside.>

Subaru: <...Sorry, I don't understand what you're saying.>

Puck: <It's tricky to explain. That Lia is seeking my help, and calling to the crystal, and can't hear my voice, all are entirely true. That she's scared of being alone, and trembling without her support is also fact. But.>

Subaru: <—>

Puck: <Her unconscious is rejecting my materialization and our mutual communication. Her heart's front and back ends are in disagreement, is maybe how to say it.>

Heart's front and back ends, is the descriptor at which Subaru gulps.

Surely this wouldn't mean split personalities, but that said, every time crises has borne down on Subaru in this world, it's come with the multiple experiences of his own heart betraying him.

Then, supposing that Emilia is presently in a similar situation... Subaru: <You can't influence Emilia from your end?>

Puck: <That's tricky. The back end's imposing force is stronger than the front end. I bet that if I could get to the front end, it'd be big trouble for Lia

mentally.>

Subaru: <Do you have any guesses on what trouble it'd be for her? Like something where if you came out, it'd cause something inconvenient for Emilia...>

Puck: <But don't you already know?>

A sort of teasing tone enters Puck's voice. After only a momentary silence, Subaru lowers his eyes. Subaru: <—It's just speculation.>

Puck: <Yup, that's good. Now let's have us a listen. I did say, yes? That I'm expecting things from you, Subaru.>

Puck gives Subaru his entirely ungratifying stamp of approval. Feeling his mood lighten somewhat even from this calibre of assurance, the statement pushes Subaru on.

Subaru: <If you're there, then Emilia...> Puck: <Mmhm, mmhm.>

Subaru: <...will have to accept some inconvenient part of her past. —That's why Emilia's unconsciously keeping you from interfering.>

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Puck: <—>

Puck receives Subaru's thoughtwaves not with rejection or a laugh, but with silence. Supposing that the unseen cat spirit were present in form here, then

surely he would have his carefree demeanour and expression in tact, his long tail swaying to and fro.

Puck: <Incredible, Subaru. That's a better answer than what I expected.> Says Puck, in admiration, after a period of silence.

Subaru sighs out his nose.

Subaru: <You can compliment me, but seriously it doesn't make me happy at all.>

Puck: <It's honest praise. You surely didn't have that much information to work with, and that just with speculations you managed to reach this is truly surprising. You understand Lia's heart well.>

The sense of compassion is large. Likely, Puck's consciousness is gazing at the sleeping Emilia. Lured in by the voice, Subaru looks at her visage in slumber.

Emilia rests in a sleep so deep it's impossible to discern any dreams bad or good. The TRIAL, whittling at her heart, and her concordant past.

But Subaru had doubts as to how accurate this recreation of the past was to the real past which accosted her.

Subaru's TRIAL had presented in the form of goodbyes to his parents, symbols of his past regrets. Of course it had. Subaru's past which merited reflection wasn't any single, big event, but the environment he'd been in and the very time he spent in sloth itself.

And so the TRIAL created an illegitimate occasion for Subaru, a pleasant time spent with his parents, urging Subaru to part with them.

Subaru: <The pasts aren't necessarily faithful to what actually happened. It draws from the guy challenging's mental scenery, and other requirements, to be reconstructed in a shape fitting for the TRIAL.>

Echidna had explained to Subaru how the TRIAL generally worked. It would assemble information that even Subaru himself didn't consciously remember out of his memories, and use that to craft an ELABORATE, COUNTERFEIT WORLD.

She had said that his goodbye to his parents was not real, and only his own self-satisfaction.

—And why is that? He thought now.

Subaru: <The pasts you see in the tomb is a forgery in trappings of the real. The asshole who set up the TRIAL arranged the thing so it'd present the problem which'd let the challenger reach the answer that'd make them fucking feel best.>

She hadn't stated that much, but Subaru is confident that Echidna would do this. Even Subaru had seen at least this much of the witch's malevolence.

Subaru: <The past Emilia's seeing has correct and incorrect parts. The difference is... you know something that will definitively differ from her past. And so Emilia's unconsciously rejecting any attempts at calling you out.>

Puck: <...You have to wonder. If I'm around, Lia will see the correct, legitimate past. Why could Lia's true heart be rejecting me, while knowing that?>

Subaru: <That one's...>

Simple, is how Subaru goes to continue, before hesitating.

Subaru's hesitation is also for simple reasons. Speaking any further means unveiling the truth of Emilia's past. The cruel and aversive times Emilia had spoken of were a covering Emilia's heart was using to conceal the truth.

Puck: <The true events which Lia'd rather forget are even more hopeless than the false events she spoke about.>

Puck follows on from where Subaru stopped.

Recognizing this thing he had managed to go without recognizing, Subaru's face twists in grief as he looks at Emilia.

The warm, friendly times she spent with the elves—who then cursed her with spite and hatred, dousing her in umbrage as she welcomed a long, long goodbye inside the ice.

Just thinking about that past near shredded Subaru's heart and body, but for Emilia that was a tender cradle to hide the wicked, actual truth.

Subaru: <You know what Emilia actually saw?>

Puck: <...Sorry, but I don't know that one either. It was after the forest was frozen over that I met Lia. So I don't know what it is about my presence that she's afraid of. I don't know what it is about me that influences Lia's past.>

Puck mutters in frustration. Subaru bites his lip.

Emilia's true past. Thanks to this, Subaru's figured out a piece of the answer to

why she cannot overcome the TRIAL.

Emilia is shown her true past, and a different past, every time she takes the TRIAL. And she desires for the false past to be the real one.

Until she presents an answer for the legitimate past, she will not be able to surmount the TRIAL. So long as her heart is deceiving her, the past's sweet knives will continue shredding her mind.

Subaru: <What do I do?> Puck: <I don't know.>

Subaru: <I want to help Emilia. I want to be her strength.>

Puck: <It's the same for me. I exist only for her sake. If I can't help her, then there's no reason for me to exist.>

Subaru: <I want to support her in what she wants to do, I want to stand at her side.> Puck: <—>

Faced with Subaru as he presses further, Puck falls into contemplative silence. Subaru waits intently for the spirit's reply. And with a voice laced with determination,

Puck: <Subaru. —There is one possibility.> Subaru: <Possibility?>

Puck: <It's a method I definitely would not have considered on my own, and plainly said even now I'm strongly adverse to it. This is a proposal I figured I would've never stated, even if I did think of it.>

Subaru braces himself for what proposal Puck is going to present. At the very least, this is the first time Subaru has ever heard Puck sound so serious when addressing someone other than Emilia.

Subaru: <What're you gonna make me do?>

Puck: <I'm the one who'll be doing it. But I will be having you do the cleanup afterwards.> Subaru: <...It seriously feels like you're gonna say something insane, I'm kinda scared.>

Puck: <I didn't think at all that'd I'd be relying on someone else so intensely, either. But, well... I think that you alone would stake your life, assuming it was for Lia's sake.>

Subaru takes a small breath, Puck's words packed with great emotion.

This what Puck though about Subaru—and there's no room to doubt it. Assuming it were for Emilia's sake, then Natsuki Subaru could certainly risk his life.

Subaru silently indicates his assent. Puck, inside the crystal, surely nods. And, with his voice quiet,

Puck:

<Tomorrow morning, I will make Lia break the contract. —Should the relationship between myself and Lia terminate, then I'm sure that when she cries, you'll comfort her.>

Chapter 93: Mutual Proposals

Puck: <If the contract between me and her terminates, can I maybe leave what comes after to you?> Subaru: <...Depending on why you're doing this, yeah.>

Wetting his lips with his tongue, Subaru ignores the pressing dryness of his throat as he faces Puck. Being that he is inside the crystal, Puck's expression remains invisible to Subaru. But the vortex of emotion packed in his words convinces Subaru that these are no frivolous statements.

But, they're talking about contracts.

And even moreso, a contract between a spirit and a spirit practitioner, who put the greatest emphasis on the things.

Puck's declaration of one-sidedly MAKING THE CONTRACT BREAK—the motives behind this are nothing Subaru can suppose so easily.

Subaru: <The contracts between you and Emilia... put simply, it's an agreement between a spirit and a contractor, right? Making that break'd have to come with an appropriate penalty, yeah?>

Puck: <Yes, naturally.>

Subaru: <If my imagination's correct, the contractor is someone who borrows a spirit's power by upholding the contract. If the contractor can't uphold the contract, well this is obvious but the spirit loses pretext to lend the contractor their strength. ...So basically, making the contract break means...>

Puck: <That the tie between myself and Lia will disappear, pretty much.>

Puck offers no denials or amendments to Subaru's speculation, instead accepting it. But if he was affirming this, then that meant—

Subaru: <Her being unable to borrow your power... means Emilia loses her combat strength. What's gonna happen's that she gets demoted to just being a sole, single girl.>

Puck: <That doesn't really have anything to do with it for you, does it? Regardless of whether Lia has power or not, you're the one not wanting to let her fight. Does look like the disagreement around how Lia herself thinks about it got you down, though.>

Subaru: <Guh... That's, not wrong, no. But my feelings and that stuff doesn't matter to this. All this blah blah about combat power's unrelated to the core of the problem. What's important here is... what will happen with Emilia, when you're not with her anymore.>

Puck's absence was, to Emilia, equivalent to losing her mental support.

If what Puck's said so far is truth, then the deep parts of Emilia's heart have noticed that Puck isn't actually sleeping. The delicate bond between them has not been severed.

But even with this slight link between them in tact, Emilia is haggard and cornered. So much so that she gets entirely dependant on Subaru, saying she won't leave his side.

If that was what being truly devoid of her connection with Puck meant, then

Subaru: <It wouldn't be strange for Emilia to lose mental equilibrium on the spot. That has to be one of the top three things you don't want to see, either. What're you plotting.>

Puck: <There's no plots in it. I'm only doing what will push things into the best form for Lia. I'm not going to do and I can't do things that she doesn't wish for.>

Subaru: <Emilia is wishing for her contract with you to be annulled?>

Puck: <That's wrong, Subaru. The loss of our contract is nothing more than a side-product for granting her wishes. Lia's present wish is, without any doubt, to overcome the tomb's TRIAL. There's no need to doubt that, and you're safe to believe it.>

Subaru has no suspicions regarding that point, either.

Emilia's been unable to face her past, instead witnessing a false past as the TRIAL repeatedly breaks her—is Puck's hypothesis, which also does not invite doubts on said point, supposing Subaru believes it.

Subaru believed, more than anyone else, that Emilia's nature was nothing so diminutive as to only

PRETEND to be attempting to overcome the obstacles before her.

Subaru's agreement should not be transmitting to Puck in words. But nevertheless, Puck's mental voice lowers slightly, as if communicating straight to Subaru's heart.

Puck: <I'm certain that if she learns I'm gone, Lia will break down. So bad that she'll be crying like a child, wailing, chaotic.>

Subaru: <—>

Puck: <But, I think that's okay. This situation where her surface heart believes I'm gone, and inner heart knows I'm here, in itself is what's unnatural. When both her heart's front and back understand that I'm gone... when the obvious shackles sealing her past come undone, then for the first time, Lia will be able to face her heart.>

Puck's words are quiet, but packed with multitudinous emotion.

Compassion, sorrow, joy, and abounding devotion, ready to sacrifice everything to his most dear. Subaru: <Then, losing the bond with you... so that she can face herself, will let her move forward?>

Puck: <Mhm, yeah. I'm sure there'll be many more painful things, but I know Lia's a girl who can persevere through them.>

Subaru: <You're not gonna be with her any more, y'know. You aren't worried? You want to be with your daughter, infinitely soft-hearted and always putting herself second to her disadvantage, protecting her. Isn't that what you think?>

Subaru himself is starting to lose sight of what exactly it is he's saying.

Should Puck's proposal produced the desired results, then absolutely it will beckon in the

developments that Subaru is hoping for. Puck is exactly right, the existence or nonexistence of Emilia's combat ability is completely unrelated to this for Subaru, who is anguishing to keep her from the battleground.

Subaru can happily welcome Puck's proposal, and has no reason to hinder it. And still.

Puck: <Though, my thoughts were that lately, you haven't been very happy about me being at Lia's side.>

Subaru: <You're not wrong to think that. ...With the stuff that's happened between us, your stocks're at an ultimate low for me, and they're not gonna be climbing so easily. One decision where it's like you're sacrificing yourself for Emilia isn't going to clear away this embittered distrust.>

Puck: <That certainly was a statement, that made me kind of sad.> Subaru: <But.>

This ironing out of mutual opinions is assuredly not inaccurate. Subaru doubted he could simply swallow down Puck's words, or that his negative impression of him would change so easily.

These words Subaru spoke were not falsehood. But,

Subaru: <I'm envisioning Emilia there without you, in sadness. And I know best, so much it's painful, that you're the biggest presence there is for Emilia. That's what you are and so, I...>

Puck: <—>

His words not proceeding, Subaru proceeds only with a vortex of indefinite thought. Puck too preserves the mental silence, quietly waiting for Subaru's vague ideas to take shape.

But the more panicked he gets, his answer loses more of its definition, turning it into something uncertain.

Subaru: <I'm. So, for me, you're...>

Puck: <Your presence is a big part of why I can make this decision, Subaru.>

Murmurs Puck. The whisper in his skull prompts Subaru to raise his head, looking, stunned, at the green crystal.

Puck: <As you said, Lia's more important than anything to me. I want to always be watching over her, and I want to be at her side to lend her my strength. Even now, when I determine it's for her sake that I be gone, those feelings stay unchanged.>

Subaru: <But then, why?> Puck: <Because you're here.> Subaru: <—>

Subaru's breath feels to stop.

Puck: <In this place... no, in this world, you're the only one who can stake their life for Lia like me. Through the time we've spent together until now, you've proved that. Lia would... if you exclude me, then you're probably who she'd rely on most. That's a definite. You can believe that.>

Subaru: <Even, said... I don't have amazing powers like you do, and I'm not incredible enough to blast the obstacles out of her way with brute force. The best I can do is puzzle things over with her, let her vent about her troubles... that's all. You really think you can task me with what comes after, when that's all I can do?>

Puck: <It looks like you're misunderstanding, I'm not saying I want you to replace me. The things only I can do are things only I can do. And taking the reverse of that, I'm expecting that the things only you can do will help Lia.>

Puck's words continue, not stopping at all.

He blocks Subaru's routes of escape, so as not to lose the time for the decision on Emilia.

Puck: <Even without me, Lia is much stronger than you. And that is definitely in the sense of the **STRENGTH** you're talking about. But, just as you know, she's weak. She definitely has this **WEAKNESS** that I'm talking about. And I want you to give her support for that weakness.>

Subaru: <...When the contract severs and your connection breaks, what happens to you?>

Puck: <That I can be material like this is because of my pass with Lia. If that connection is broken, then I'll have to keep constantly materialized to preserve my existence. ...But, me continually being materialized means that I'm consuming the inexhaustible mana in the atmosphere dry. If you saw my true form, I'd suppose it'd definitely shock you, Subaru.>

The **TRUE FORM** Puck is talking about probably means when he is giant. The apex of quadrupeds, monster of raging blizzard, beast of the end.

Indeed, if he has to remain in that form constantly, then there is no way he could continue existing. Subaru: <So, then... you mean you'll be erased?>

Puck: <It's different from being erased. I'll just go back to being the small existence I was, before I contracted Lia. Somewhere with a deep connection to me... probably, it'll be Elior Forest. I'll go to sleep inside something there as my anchor, waiting for the time I'm awoken.>

Subaru: <Awoken... meaning?>

Puck: <By Lia, of course. —This is where the contract between me and her ends. But if a time comes where she needs to make a new contract, and she's going to choose a spirit partner... I know she'll choose me again. That's what I believe.>

Feeling that Puck spoke this in a cheery tone, Subaru swallows his breath.

This was a decision where he might end up disappearing, but Puck's voice hosts not a fragment of unease. His personality is fundamentally optimistic—but irrelevant to this, as not even a shade of anxiety cloaks his voice.

Puck had not a single doubt that Emilia would choose him again.

Emilia, who would lose her contract with Puck and have to face her past. It does not even occur in his imaginings that Emilia would fail to fully accept her past, and be crushed.

She would overcome her past, and when she next sought a contract, would choose him.

As far as Puck was concerned, that was definite.

He does not doubt Emilia's strength, does not doubt the time he spent together with her, and so he is capable of choosing to sever his connection with her.

Subaru: <—>

For an always-wavering Subaru, it is a bond so strong and firm, it's dazzling. It was his deep love and trust for Emilia that allowed Puck's heart to be iron.

Subaru: <And you're pushing it on me to comfort Emilia when she breaks down.>

And so Subaru speaks in desperation, his tone rather resentful. Puck seems to click his throat, his tone one of smiling,

Puck: <It really does pain my heart to do it. But... I'm entrusting my precious daughter to you, so I'd like you to at least overcome that much together.>

Subaru: <...I'll be taking that as you secretly accepting me as Emilia-tan's partner.>

Puck: <If I blow you up right here, then I guess I'll have think over a lot of issues again.> Subaru: <That is some insanely terrifying revenge, you shitty goddamn cat!!>

Replying to the extreme statement with rudeness, Subaru smiles just a little.

He defers to the depth Puck's feelings for Emilia. Although only slightly, this bantering from before the trench between them formed relaxes Subaru's mind a little.

There was also something Subaru had figured, hearing that severing Puck's contract with Emilia would distance him from this place. Temporarily assuming that this goes well—then the equilibrium of the bet should shift more than a little.

Subaru: <I understand your plan. There's still some anxiety over whether it'll actually go as thought, but... I'll put on some feigned ignorance, and help you in your inductions.>

Puck: <I wonder what it must feel like, to manipulate the girl you love.>

Subaru: <The guilt's gonna crush me stop it. And besides if Emilia sincerely does understand about lots of these things, then... after it's over, she'll probably notice that she was spurred into this, too.>

Puck: <If that happens, she might hate you for being complicit with me. Scared?>

Subaru: <Well y'know what. When it's you you just have a teenage girl going, 'Don't put my dirty

washing in along with my dad's!' level, our vectors of being hated are entirely different.>

Puck being hated was entirely a family problem, while Subaru being hated was a deeper, more life-threatening thing. Though Emilia would probably understand if Subaru spoke to her will full sincerity.

Even if he can convince her about the purposes behind it, of course Emilia isn't going to feel good about being induced into a better frame of mind. — Surely, he would not be forgiven for that.

Subaru: <This late, huh. —You're really saying that this late, when I've done countless unforgivable things and made her cry countless times, I don't have the resolve to do this?>

Puck: <—>

Subaru: <I'm accepting your terms, Puck. I'll be cleaning up your mess. If Emilia breaks down crying tomorrow morning... then she'll be doing it in my arms.>

Puck: <—Mhm. Well then, let's see me count on you for that. I think this is going to wind up pushing lots of troubles down the line onto you as well, though.>

A slight sense of shame enters Puck's voice as Subaru accepts the proposal. Closing one eye, Subaru begins with a,

Subaru: "Well then,"

Subaru: <Are you open to considering a proposal from me, as well?> Puck: <...A proposal.>

Subaru: <Yeah, a proposal. Don't worry. I'm same as you, acting while thinking to secure a future which'll be good for Emilia.>

Subaru thumps his hand to his chest. Puck's silence indicates his acceptance.

Subaru: <There's some things I wanna ask, and things I wanna test once I've asked them. —Emilia could wake up, so let's keep this short.>

Chapter 94: Left Behind

—The first thing she feels upon waking up is the loneliness in her empty right hand.

Thus thinks her fuzzy mind, leaden still from waking. Then, realising alongside her sobering what a selfish sentiment that is, her cheeks redden in anger and shame.

Rather than uprighting herself she chooses to ball up in the bed, curling the blankets around herself, making herself small. In her own wretchedness, which she awakened to alongside her awakening, she is quick to misjudge herself despite the start of a new day.

???: “—Awful, awful, just so awful. I'm... really, selfish.”

Mutters the girl curled up in the bed—Emilia—as she gives a long, long sigh at her own repulsive state.

She fists and unfists her hands multiple times under the covers, remembering the sensation present there until just before her sleeping.

Uneven, thick fingers, the skin slightly firmer at the tips, entirely unlike her own thin and frail ones—which was something she thought on every opportunity she had to hold those hands.

It was the touch of the boy who had cared for her, spoke kindness to her, and until she surrendered her consciousness, sat at her bedside while holding her hand—Subaru, and the feeling of his bony, delicate palm.

The first thing she unconsciously thought upon waking was her melancholy about the emptiness of her fingers, and the loss of the touch of that hand.

Unconditionally, she's beyond help.

She had leaned on him so much. But was her nature desiring to pile more burdens on the boy? Even after she had already troubled everyone with her vices and weaknesses to an irreparable degree?

Today was already her fourth day in SANCTUARY—and following from the first day, Emilia had devoted herself to the TRIAL in the tomb deep in SANCTUARY both yesterday and the day before.

For an Emilia aiming to with the Royal Selection and secure the throne of Lughnica, SANCTUARY's aid was the very first step on the road of things she had to acquire.

The governor of this land, Roswaal, is Emilia's backer, and these are citizens in circumstances similar to her half-elf self. If she cannot present herself for their approval, when the conditions are so heavily in her favour, then how can she intend to possibly do anything from here on out?

Emilia is undeniably in a disadvantageous position compared to the other Selection candidates. For powerless Emilia to win, the help of others is indispensable. And it is only by Emilia's own actions that she will earn the trust needed to secure that help.

For an Emilia who correctly understood her own position, the things she has to do and has to present are clear. She has not any wavering about that.

But, what casts a gloom over her eyes is— Emilia: "...The TRIAL."

The single absolute condition for gaining the acceptance of the people of SANCTUARY is to beat the TRIAL.

These are residents who cannot exit out the forest encircling SANCTUARY, because of the barrier wired to the tomb. She needs to traverse the TRIAL and eliminate the barrier if she's going to fight alongside them in the outside world.

While there's an issue of sentiment too, if she cannot at least manage this much, then the residents will not even attempt to accept her.

Defeating the TRIAL will make the requirements for dealing with both the physical and sentimental problems simple. Once the issue has shifted into a unipolar form, neither fastidious logic nor pointless debates are going to happen.

The problem now is that the contents of the TRIAL are deadly poison for Emilia.

—Inside the tomb, an unfeeling voice announced: Face your past.

When she closes her eyes, she can remember vividly that world of white.

Instantly, as if she's been thrown naked into the frost, she shivers at the unstoppable chill.

Was the dread coursing through her body because she remembered the cold of that day, or because she had not forgotten even now her fear from back then?

What did Subaru think, hearing her talk clumsily about her past?

This past, impossible to forget, which even now bound her with chains of guilt. It was yesterday afternoon that Emilia revealed it all to Subaru.

She had first challenged the TRIAL the night before, and her heart had been soundly beaten. It was in Subaru's arms that she cried, bawled, broke down, and when his voice and tender stroking of her back finally calmed her, Emilia announced to everyone waiting outside the tomb that she had failed. She did not remember what expressions everyone made, in hearing that.

The composure for her to check everyone's faces one-by-one was absent.

They could be gazing at her with scorn, dejection, anything, it didn't matter. She merely acted firm, parted with everyone, tumbled into the house lent to her, and immediately after realising that she was now alone, was swallowed by unbearable terror.

Unable to stay holed up like that, she burst out of the building. She was shivering in the night wind when she ran into Subaru, who was walking under the moonlight.

Subaru confessed his resolve: he would spend himself for her sake. Emilia lined up purely idealistic screeds about her determination and ran away.

Emilia, cornered by her own words, did not notice how equally stricken Subaru had been by hearing them.

Emilia didn't remember how she got back to her lodgings after that.

What next woke her up was Subaru's calls for her, his face pale, her collapsed on the floor.

She talked with the worried Subaru about the impetus for this, the TRIAL—and inevitably, it turned into a conversation about Emilia's past.

Emilia had reported her past to Subaru without including even a speck of dramatization or any lies at all.

She had just been forced to witness vividly the crime she committed. She took that unforgettable thing, peeled off the scab of her memories, exposing the raw wound to the wind as she spoke her story.

Simultaneously, Emilia confessed that her motives for aspiring for the throne were incredibly personal and selfish.

To say she was unafraid would be impossible.

As consequence of her mistake for which her youth did not console her,

Emilia made victims of far too many people. And she went without paying the recompense, even now passing her time by herself, in leisure.

The finisher to this was that the methods she chose for her atonement could only be achieved by entangling even more people in the mess.

She thought it natural that she disgust people, receive their scorn, and be distanced from them. But on the other hand, even she had recognized her conviction that Subaru would surely never desert her.

No matter how awful her past was, and even knowing that she was attempting to atone for it with a selfish wish, Natsuki Subaru could surely not forsake her now.

Emilia had witnessed the things he had protected through his wounding and wailing, and witnessed the outcomes of his actions.

He was a kind, dutiful, compassionate boy. He bore far too many things, and without even considering the idea of letting them go, kept running despite his incredible injury.

Assuming that she herself was a piece of the baggage he carried, then surely, no matter how repulsive her nature was, he would not be capable of letting her go.

—This was cruel calculatedness in the truest of meanings, and perhaps even insidious.

She shakes her head to deny the thing, thinking that's not the way I see it at all. But if she said that the concept had never skimmed through her head before, it would be a lie. And if there were a part of her that hoped for this outcome, then that was equivalent to the entirety of Emilia affirming the thought.

She put her trust in somebody who disliked her not in the least, and managed to speak openly about her past, which may earn her dislike.

And really, that was all it was.

Subaru ultimately showed no shock or dismay after hearing Emilia's past, and did not do anything to fault her for her sins.

With her mental fatigue peaked from her confession, her sleepiness bore in on her. The touch of his hand as it held hers, and its abounding thoughtfulness, had not changed even a single bit.

Subaru had acted so precisely in line with what her repulsive parts expected, she could spite it. Subaru, with his sharp eyes softened in worry, sincerely concerned about Emilia. His kindness was a horrifically sweet poison for Emilia.

Her heart was liable to melt, her resolve to melt, her sincere and disgusting thoughts to come unveiled.

If only I could leave everything to somebody else, and have someone else undergo the hardship for me. Should Emilia voice her whining, that of a child averting their eyes from something they disliked, then undoubtedly Subaru would expend himself without any pause and devote himself for Emilia's sake.

—This should not be forgiveable.

Ever since they met, Emilia has always been being saved by Subaru.

At the loot house in the Capital, at the mansion under witchbeast threat, at the Selection Hall amid the glares of the candidates, at the mansion targeted alongside the village by an unknown cabal.

Emilia had always been clinging to Subaru's hand. And, unable to bear seeing him wounded, she had even cast said hand away, reasoning that she lacked the qualifications for this to be happening. But even despite that, Natsuki Subaru did not attempt in the slightest to let her go.

Far from it. He had instead told this to Emilia, ignorant to why he was saving her: Subaru: "I like you. So, I want to be your strength."

Emilia had never experienced that kind of wholly devoted, entirely baseless love confession before. The only people who had ever expressed fondness to her had been the elves she lived with, and later her foster parent Puck.

She had left the forest by Roswaal's guidance, and felt keenly again the poorness of the situation for half-elves. In her two trips gone to the Capital, her understanding of that intensified further.

While she had accepted Roswaal's plan and would fulfil her goals, the trend of disdain for half-elves remained deeply ingrained in the world—and she had harboured a dim hope that perhaps, that would change a little. But the one who thought that hope a transient thing, and could not fully believe in it, had also in fact been Emilia.

And so how gigantic a thing was it for her when, with consideration included to her being a half elf, and to her being weak, Subaru told her he liked her?

He was not of her race, was not someone determined by birth to spend time with her, had met her not by anyone's designs but purely by coincidence, had had his amicability toward her deepen, and from their shared sentiments there budded his warm feelings—and just how this saved Emilia.

And so, this time she could not rely on Subaru.

Every time he undergoes hardship in her place, the permanent wounds on him compound. It doesn't end just with his body. His mental scars, too.

Emilia did not think Subaru someone extraordinary, who possessed reslient body or mind.

He had a strong heart for accomplishing his intentions, a kind heart considerate to those around him, but he was not extraordinary.

Sad things hurt him, he cried when in pain, and he would die if he shed too much blood. Just that kind of normal person.

Emilia had no intentions of forcing this normal boy to bear any further hardship.

She desired nothing further than for him to keep supporting her back, standing at her side, while she proceeded forward. But even that was an incredibly selfish wish, so much so that it embarrasses Emilia.

Should he support her frail resolve, then surely Emilia could overcome her obstacles without folding.

She ought to fight the obstacles before her by herself. Emilia: "After all, if I don't..."

If she kept relying on him, leaving absolutely everything to him, clinging and leaning on him, then someday Subaru would surely come to think her a burden.

Just thinking that that day would come terrified her.

It was something she had avoided believing she wanted. It was something she had given up on, reasoning that even should she desire it, she would never get it. It was something she had kept out of her awareness, but something she had always wished for.

And because she had gotten it, because it had been bestowed to her, because she had taken the hand offered to her—Emilia now could not bear to think of losing it.

Emilia: “—”

Emilia's sins had painted the forest in white, trapping her friends and family beneath the snow and ice.

Emilia herself had fallen asleep inside the ice as well, and gone almost 100 years until Puck saved her, without recognizing her crime.

Her grave and aversive sin. What was even more sinful was that Emilia did not remember even a single thing about the actual heart of her deeds.

The inbetween is gone, and although aware that it was her actions which shunted everybody into white stagnation, she can't remember what she was thinking, or why she did it.

She thought it natural she be called a witch's spawn.

After Puck woke her from the ice, Emilia spent 7 years in Elior Forest. Unable to make or cultivate anything to eat in the frozen woods, she would go to the villages near to the forest, relying on them for most of her food.

She would not forget the terrified gazes on her then, or how they called her THE WITCH OF THE FROZEN FOREST.

Witch. The insult had suited her.

She spoke of her resolve, necessary to overcome the TRIAL, while thinking her own words sounding hollow herself. Emilia had not any idea of what she could do to defeat her past. She merely evaded Subaru's questionings with pleasant-sounding words, choosing to stay holed up inside her shell and her dreams.

With the touch of Subaru's palm present and definite, she fell asleep not long after.

—She indeed doubted she dreamed anything, then.

When she woke up, Subaru was there in the same posture he had been, having watched over her sleeping. Unassailable emotion swelled up in her chest at seeing it, and as he led her by the hand, she stepped out into SANCTUARY—to challenge the TRIAL.

The results of her attempt are obvious. She was unable to beat the TRIAL.

Subaru and Ram saw her off outside the tomb. She tread inside, the gazes of SANCTUARY residents Garfiel and Lewes at her back. But the TRIAL would not pay any mind to an Emilia who had gone in without any definite plans, or neglected to prepare any clear terms for winning.

As always the past tormented Emilia, plagued her, pierced her.

When her consciousness returned to being atop the cold, hard floor of the tomb, Emilia noticed that her cheeks were wet. This crying was ridiculous, and her wretchedness was loathsome.

Unable to grasp any clues for overcoming the TRIAL, Emilia left the tomb in haggard straits, to be welcomed by the worried Subaru and others.

Afterwards and just like the night before, she was lulled into peaceful sleep in this building, losing consciousness right after tumbling into bed—which she only realised now, this morning.

Emilia: “And in the end, nothing progressed at all... I'm useless...”

If there were anything that she understood yesterday, it was that she was a hopeless, spoiled child, always causing problems for Subaru and everyone else, but still unable to find even a single glimmer of hope—the unchanging truth of her being weak.

Emilia: “Puck...”

The pendant hanging at her chest—and the green lustre inset at its end, the anchor for her contracted spirit, Puck.

It had been guaranteed that whenever she called his name in frail voice, he would reply “What's wrong?” in his usual, carefree tone.

It had been almost two weeks since those replies had ceased.

At first she had thought it his hibernation period, which occurs once every several months. There had been times before where Puck would stop giving her any reaction, and on every occasion Emilia would endure the loneliness, waiting for his return and awakening.

But his hibernation periods always ended in three or four days, and this occasion's long timespan was a first. And most importantly, even if Puck was in a hibernation period, then provided that Emilia seriously called out to him, it would interrupt his sleep and he would answer.

She cannot even sense that reaction from the current, distant Puck.

Something surely happened to him.

There was surely something—some irreparable something—that happened in his sleep, and he could not materialize. If this was the case, then what should she do?

She had spent such a long time with Puck, and still Emilia could not find any methods to kickstart him if he left her alone like this.

Neither the TRIAL, nor the things with Subaru, nor the settlement with her past, nor Puck's absent presence—offer Emilia even a single good omen.

Emilia: "...I'm so stupid."

Just before Emilia voices her discontent that there is nobody at her side to offer her their helping hand in this deadlocked situation, she stops herself.

It was exactly from doing this that she had degraded irreparably. —Already viewing herself lower than ever before, Emilia does not wish to think she can descend even further.

Emilia: "No, stop it. Thinking entirely about these bad things... he's not showing up today, but Puck must have a reason for it. And nothing's solved about the TRIAL yet, either. I have to keep it together."

Lightly slapping her pale hands to her cheeks, Emilia keeps her thoughts steady.

She looks up, then taking a comb to even out the knots in her hair. —Part of her is pained about this. This job was one she had always tasked to Puck. Emilia did not even take her own initiative to sort out her grooming.

She passes her hand through her hair, confirming the knots are gone. Looking in the mirror is not something she does. She had speedily hung a cloth over the mirror in this room, and deposited it in a corner where it would not reflect anything.

As her fingers fiddle with the ends of her hair, Emilia determines that she has

succeeded in the bare minimum of arrangements. She then sweeps her fingers up through her silver tresses, bunching it together as she begins to plait.

Preparing her braid. It was Puck who determined Emilia's daily hairstyle, and adhering to it was one of the important avowals of their contract. Emilia had not received any instructions from Puck for two weeks now on how to do her hair, and she had instead kept persistent with the style he had last instructed her, for this entire period.

And of course she attended to her other stipulations too, like her bathing, after-bath exercises, her talks with the minor spirits, her mood not cheerful but nonetheless fastidious. It seemed, should she not keep to these customs, that her connection with the invisible Puck would disappear completely, which terrified her.

Emilia: “—Mhm.”

Parting her hair to the left and right from the centre to plait two braids had been her method thus far. But today she crafted her hair into one long, single braid to flow down her back.

Having properly abided her contract with Puck today, Emilia wishes for the contract's continuance. Aware of the definite connection inside her, she—

Emilia: “...huh?”

Emilia yelps quietly just as she goes to change her clothes before Ram can arrive with a bucket of water.

The gaze of her shocked, amethyst eyes lands on the pendant at her breast.

Just as she had confirmed before, hanging from the end of the pendant is a green crystal, the proof of Puck's presence—with a crack ruptured down its face.

Emilia: "Wh... weh, wha? Wait... what's, what?"

Putting her hand to the inexplicably cracked jewel, Emilia utters fragments to no sentence.

A violent shock jolts her eyes, her trembling fingers timidly stroking the crystal's face. The fractures intensify at the touch of her fingertips. She wails a quiet, strangled scream.

Emilia: "N-no... no, don't... wait, please hold on... come on, Puck, hold on..." She shakes her head, but this does not stop the crystal's collapse.

Emilia puts all her focus into the palm of her hand as she holds the crystal, trying not to stimulate it,

but her unstoppable shivering hastens the collapse, the anchor disintegrating in Emilia's hands.

What will happen, when this damage reaches the whole jewel?

Faced with this first-ever occurrence, with this entirely unimagined situation, Emilia's mind goes perfectly blank.

But there is one thing she does know. Which is— Emilia: "If this keeps going, then Puck will...!"

—This was the goodbye between Emilia and her effective family. Emilia: "—!"

She raises her head. Looks about the area. No one is here. It's still early morning, and the outside shows no signs of people activity either. She could raise her voice, but no one would hear her. She could race out, seeking help, but the jostling feels liable to trigger the end, and so Emilia does not move.

Lowering her voice, stopping her breath, Emilia gazes as the disintegrating crystal in her hand. She has no solution. Rather than endeavour to distance the certainly-loomng end, she frantically attempts only to slow it down.

And,

Emilia: “—a”

Her tardiness in avoiding this means out rings the crack of the crystal fracturing to bits.

Upon Emilia's palm as her eyes widen in stupefaction is the green crystal, its form entirely lost. The jewel fractures apart, the fragments lose their colour, and without any life circulating it, its gleam dims.

Emilia: “Come, on... Puck, you're... just kidding, right?”

Clinging lastly to hope, Emilia calls out to her palm, her voice weak.

But the gemstone in her hands—lost of its shape—is now nothing more than green grains of dust. Nevermind a spirit, this thing had lost its power to store even an infinitesimal load of mana, the green dregs of jewel waiting only to be cast to the winds.

Anyone could see that Emilia's fleeting hopes were already fruitless.

The only one who could not accept the reality of them being fruitless was Emilia.

Emilia: “N-no, this can't... this can't be happening... I-I mean, Puck he, when we first met he... said we're f-family... that I, wouldn't be alone any more...”

Reeling in their supposedly assured bond, Emilia repeats back the old promise, her tone infantile.

—The fragmented rock in her hand replies only with silence. Emilia: “...iar.”

Unable to bear the silence, and her eyes now understanding that this is reality, she looks up at the ceiling, her amethyst gaze wavering with tears.

Emilia: "Puck, you... Dad, YOU LIAR!!"

Falling to her knees, she hurls the fractured fragments at the wall.

The bits of stone ping against its surface, perhaps the quiet announcement of Emilia and Puck's overly abrupt parting.

Emilia buries her face in her hands, wailing. Wailing. No tears flow.

Only a hollow sense of lacking weighs heavy in Emilia's chest.

Chapter 95: Sigma

Ram: "Barusu. Are the preparations proceeding along for your nefarious plot?"

Leaving a cried-out Emilia behind, it's just after he exits the building that Ram addresses Subaru. With his hand still to the door, Subaru narrows his eyes at Ram, who apparently was waiting here for his exit.

Subaru: "'Nefarious plot' sounds crazy disreputable and freaks me out, kinda rather you stop with that."

Ram: "You two men are stealthily hiding things from everyone else as you design your plans, yes? Although, considering that Roswaal-sama has given his recognition, there is nothing I can especially say about that merchant acting as he pleases around SANCTUARY."

The MERCHANT Ram's talking about is probably Otto.

While they're both passing their time inside SANCTUARY, Ram, who is spending most of her time caring for Roswaal, and Otto have interacted with each other horrendously infrequently. Most likely the best opportunity they get to sparsely talk to each other is during the periods where Emilia is facing the TRIAL, and they are waiting outside for her.

That said, it's truth that Roswaal has permitted Otto's stay in SANCTUARY. Unable to openly expel him, Ram's perspective toward Otto remains harsh.

Subaru: "Eh well that's something he should put some effort in about his own, I'm not gonna go out of my way to revise it."

Ram: "A statement lacking in proper friendship. When he is paying so much mind to you, do you not ever consider that you ought to repay him, Barusu?"

Subaru: "Proper friendship... huh. No well I mean I can't refute that, but, from your perspective we look like friends?"

Ram: "When you've abandoned all restraint and are interacting with such familiarity... do you mean to suggest you are not? If that's how you act with anyone regardless of their being an absolute stranger, conversely that would be disgusting."

Ram hugs her shoulders, making a show of shuddering. Her reaction and statement lead Subaru's cheeks to relax slightly as he chuckles in the back of his throat.

Perhaps finding Subaru's suppressed laughter creepy, Ram steps backwards to birth distance between herself and him, her arms still hugging her shoulders.

Ram: "Now, Barusu, I'll restate my first question. —Are the preparations for your nefarious plot proceeding?"

Subaru: "Going steadily... would be one thing, but there's just a slight excess of turbulent spots for that to be the case."

Nevermind the details of them, it's obvious that his real plans would be seen through.

This is Ram, a card in the hand of Subaru's contract opponent, Roswaal. It's unclear how credible her words are, and likely she is acting as Roswaal's eyes and ears as he stays injured in bed.

It's inevitable that she'd pay attention to Subaru and Otto's movements. That she's grilling him about it from directly straight-on is yes indeed rather like Ram.

Subaru: "Well what about you, you came here for Emilia, didn't you? Wasting time talking to me's not gonna achieve much."

Ram: "That you've exited the building would mean you've seen to that she's about fallen asleep. One wouldn't wake so easily after such a great conniption."

Subaru: "...Pretty harsh opinion there, huh."

Ram: "It's a frank and objective opinion. Do keep that in mind as a reference."

—It occurred two and a half hours ago now that the contract between Emilia and Puck terminated.

Subaru had known it'd happen in advance thanks to Puck, but regardless of his more-or-less understanding and preparation for Emilia's confusion, grief, and shock, the nostalgia that struck Subaru in seeing Emilia then was indescribable.

Emilia, lost of her single support, half-crazed and bawling.

She had thrown her pretty silver hair into disarray, put her nails to her pale skin, hurled nearby objects around indiscriminately, throwing a child's tantrum as she bared her emotions.

That the option of going on a rampage with magic did not exist for the frenzied girl was perhaps a fortune amid misfortune for both herself and everyone else.

Regardless, knowing of Emilia's shock in advance, Subaru had waited in preparation outside her room. The instant he heard her wailing he swooped in and hugged her firm.

Then for two and a half hours he alone dealt with Emilia's faltering cries, her wails, and her frail acts of destruction, leaving her there after she fell asleep, exiting, and now here he was.

This encounter with Ram, who he had intended to entrust Emilia's change of clothes and wiping-down to, probably happened because she had been lying in wait as well. Seeing her with a pail and cloth in hand allows Subaru to feel somewhat relieved.

Ram speaks quietly,

Ram: "Barusu. —Are you truly putting your hopes in her?" Subaru: "..."

Ram: "Should you observe what her state has been until yesterday, you will find not a single optimistic factor for her overcoming the TRIAL. And to compound on this, a situation I believed could not degrade further has worsened. The Great Spirit has left Emilia-sama's side, correct?"

Subaru: "...You know this much?"

Ram: "When it's screamed, repeatedly, in a voice loud enough that it's audible from outside, even an idiot would notice. If you should notice it, Barusu, then I would notice it also. As is surely natural."

Subaru: "I'm getting the feeling I just got formally equated as an idiot but, I can't refute what you're saying. That Emilia's situation's sunken further's unfudgable truth."

In complete honesty, Ram's worries are an exact representation of Subaru's own anxiety. While he hadn't swallowed the entirety of Puck's words down wholesale, Subaru did back his proposition.

The statement that Puck's presence was acting as a stopper for Emilia facing her true past. The great changes with every loop, and his misgivings about Roswaal's gospel. Beatrice's scream, Echidna's advice, Puck's presence.

Linking the varied items together, Subaru backed Puck's decision and sent Emilia hurtling into a cage of isolation. Consequently, for the first time in her life, she was truly and actually alone.

The necessary factors for her to escape this are time, and an opportunity.

But the current Emilia is lacking in both. The situation will not bestow her with any calm circumstances, or with the extra time for her to face it, and the detonating trigger for all this exists only inside herself.

All that can happen for the latter affair is that Emilia herself finds the trigger. Ram understood this, and likely did not believe the detonation would be happening.

Excluding that last part, Subaru agreed entirely with Ram.

Subaru: "But I'm still putting my hopes in her, and I do believe in her."

Ram: "...Your expression is sunny. How on earth is it that you can make such a blithe judgement?" Subaru: "It's cause I decided to try believing in the things I ought to believe in. It's like having a FRIEND around putting in efforts for my sake, or having a trusty dragon around kind of saved me, or... I've come to believe in myself a little more."

Ram: "And how exactly does this connect to believing in Emilia-sama?"

Subaru: "If you come to believe in yourself, then wouldn't you want to believe in the target for your attentions? I like Emilia, I want to be her strength. And I like her because, well part of it's the visuals where her appearance's crazy my taste, but... the serious part's a bit different."

Subaru shrugs as he returns Ram's suspicious gaze.

The first time Subaru became conscious of Emilia was of course back when he was initially summoned to this parallel world, where he had no one to rely on and no hopes to cling to, and she was the first person most kind to him.

She saved his life, and over their following interactions, Subaru came to know the girl called Emilia, and his desire to aid her. Part of it was justified in the sense of repaying a debt, but back then not even Subaru had understood the real truth of it.

He then lost her, Returned by Death and reset the world, and although the first memories shared between them were forfeit, Subaru saved her from her deadly fate and changed the future.

The happening at the mansion included, the fight with the Witch Cult included, everything resulted from the passion originating in those first feelings, which scorched at his back all the way.

She saved him in his first time at the Capital.

She saved his near-broken mind once again at the mansion.

His life and mind saved, and wanting to repay her, by his conceit he wounded her.

Thus came the time of their parting, a mutual trench born between them. And

with the opportunity given for him to reflect on his deeds, he stood back up.

Why was it he felled the White Whale, defeated Betelgeux, and was now here still?

Why was it he recognized his deep involvement with the Witch, swallowed down the melancholy of his past through his goodbye to his false parents, and was now spurred on by an incomprehensible power still?

Subaru: "Because I love her." Ram: "—"

Subaru: "This girl I like's persevering, stubborn, not honest about her feelings at all, won't say she wants to cry when she does... she's someone who can act without hesitating to put in her all for somebody else."

Ram: "Those may be your assumptions, Barusu. While it is true that Emilia-sama possesses a nature to prioritize others before herself... do you not think it is because that by doing so, she protects her own mind? Could it not be a mechanism that she may protect herself, of detestable bloodline? Does being taken in plainly by those wiles, and used how she sees pleasant, not unsettle you?"

Subaru: "Nope."

Subaru's succinct answer leads Ram to hold her tongue.

Feeling some satisfaction at this rare reaction from her, Subaru glances back at the building. He thinks of Emilia, lying even now in bed.

Subaru: "If she's using me how she sees pleasant, then that's fine. Even if some part of Emilia views me in a calculating way, as a tool she can overuse but still won't break, that's fine."

Ram: "It does not dissatisfy you to be a tool?"

Subaru: "It's not that. It's that even if she uses me as a tool, so long as she still has the will to keep standing up and walking on, it makes me happy. If the spirit's still there in her for her to raise her head... then there's heaps of ways I can help her. She can use me however she wants."

Ram: "—"

Ram narrows her eyes in disapproval.

Being that she is someone of few expressions, this experience is a fresh one for Subaru. Here was her attitude towards a Subaru unreservedly accepting the word 'tool'. This was almost like how she herself—

Subaru: "I actually think it's you who's come up with rationalizations." Ram: "—Why do you believe so?"

Subaru: Because I recognized that in your attitude, or your behaviour up to now, there's like this... pretty precarious side I've seen. I thought you were someone who understood others's stances.

Ram: "Should you witness among others the problems that you yourself cannot fully apprehend, then likely anyone would harbour such this emotion. It rings especially so, should you learn that the problems you attempted to rationalize but cannot fully digest have been simplified by another."

After finishing her speedy speech, Ram averts her gaze, as if embarrassed by her own statements. She sighs, waving at Subaru to gesture him away from his spot afront the door.

Ram: "Well, enough. Should you be a tool, then all you must do is behave as a tool, and stake your best to serve your master. Meanwhile, I'll be taking my actions in the way I see fit. My side is at liberty to do this, surely?"

Subaru: "Well, yeah. Go on and do what you want. —But, well."

Passing him by, Ram puts her hand to the door as Subaru addresses her nape. She stops, glancing at Subaru, giving a nod to urge him to continue.

Subaru: "I'm not devoting myself to Emilia while expecting nothing in return." Ram says nothing.

Subaru: "I have my things I'm looking for from Emilia. The things I want won't happen without Emilia's help. I mentioned that stuff before about her perhaps utilizing me with calculating intentions, but... utilizing her with calculating intentions is my same case, and identical."

They're not nice words, but interactions with ulterior motives are unavoidable as a function of getting involved with others.

Said in extremes, that everybody here reach Subaru's desired future was desirable. Meaning that once Subaru had succeeded in securing that future, he would have fully utilized everyone.

He was down for being used by Emilia. Because Subaru was equally ready to use Emilia for the sake of his desired future, cling to her, and unrelentingly hold her close.

Ram: "—"

Ram wordlessly steps into the room without addressing Subaru.

The door begins to close, and just before her small frame can disappear—

Subaru: “The gospel's writ's diverged already. —In this world, Roswaal's already free.” No answer comes to tell whether she heard it or not.

The door clicks shut, the situation inside now imperceptible for Subaru.

But that said, it's highly improbable that Emilia would wake up and be rough with Ram. Part of that judgement comes from the calculation that a cried-out Emilia would lack the energy for it, but more importantly was the idea that she would need more time before waking up.

Subaru: “Tomorrow's my big day. Day after as a spare. ...Either way, cutting it close.”

Should he hit the time limit, Roswaal will bring snowfall and so the Hare will come. That happens, and SANCTUARY's over. His attempts would lose their momentum, and most importantly, Subaru was bound by contract.

In accordance to his contract with Roswaal L. Mathers, Natsuki Subaru would have to live

CHOOSING HIS METHODS FOR THE SAKE OF ONLY ONE SINGLE THING.

—With that thought, Subaru thinks: Man, this late.

Subaru: “That I can't give up on this one single future means now's just the exact same thing.”

※ * * * * * * * * * *

—Subaru's battle in SANCTUARY is presently on its third day.

The time limit on his contract with Roswaal is the sixth day. On the sixth day the calamities assaulting SANCTUARY and the mansion should be nigh unavoidable, so realistically the time limit is night of the fifth day.

Meaning that, including tonight, there are only three more chances for Emilia to challenge the tomb. However, that first one of those three scant opportunities would—

Subaru: “Tonight's probably gonna be a bust.”

Learning of Puck's disappearance and then breaking down crying through the morning, Emilia's bawling herself exhausted and falling asleep happened before noon. She had proceeded to sleep deeply, showing no signs even now of waking.

Even assuming that she wakes up before tonight, how long would it take for her to recognize the fact again that Puck was gone? The bond between her and Puck was surely nothing so short or thin that a few hours was enough to fully deal with it.

Only ever when time is limited do these incessant time-dependant problems crop up. While aware of the pointlessness of cursing an insidious god's decrees, Subaru still rather wants to curse them.

Subaru: “You being gone made her cry that much... To me that's kinda enviable, and a hundred times more loathsome, Puck.”

Imagining the visage of the grey cat spirit, Subaru gives a small shake of his head before gazing onward.

There is nothing Subaru can do for the sleeping Emilia. The very best he can do is hold her hand. If that would help protect her from nightmares, then he would gladly spend any amount of hours doing that.

But, just like how Emilia lacks any excess time, Subaru lacks any also.

He has not organized everything he needs for the bet yet.

His plan does utilize several uncertain factors, but after scrambling up all the budding sprouts he has and bolstering his hand to the limit of what is possible, he's looking at a 50/50. And even that was probably optimism.

Subaru: "And so I'm expecting some things from this conversation, Lewes-san."

Lewes: "And I'm erkspecting serm things from yer too, Su-bo. ...Since I've gertten advisories from the previous two."

Gravel crunching underfoot, there at the meeting spot appears a small silhouette—Lewes.

She makes a sour face, unfitting to her immature features, casting her gaze over the meeting spot that Subaru has prepared.

Lewes: "But that said..."

Lewes: "Choosing this place fer our meeting... Yer can be pretty unkind, Su-bo."

Subaru: "Think it's a good spot in the sense of probably no one's gonna interrupt, though. Feel like I'm gonna say unwanted things if we're around the

crystal, and also I don't see any chance of me getting used to that nose-turning stench no matter how many times I wind up there."

Pinching his nose, Subaru expresses his disgust for the reeking, nose-invading experiment site. This does turn into rallying about Lewes' birthplace, but probably she shares the sentiment herself. She gives a small smile, nodding.

Lewes: "Ders sound likely, that."

Lewes: "But I cern't say I'm pleased abert the substitute yer came up with being Gar-bo's secret base. If yer wanted somewhere hidden... just that, then there had ter be other options."

Subaru: "If we're in town, dunno who's gonna be listening in. Garfiel and Frederica's childhood house... wouldn't've been a bad pick, but I'm sure it's bad for you like it is for me if someone does overhear?"

Lewes: "Definitely."

Subaru shrugs as he seeks her agreement, Lewes grinning as she nods. She then steps into the ugly shack, a thing constructed from scrap material and dilapidated wood.

Subaru: "This's my bad, but I didn't prepare any comfy sofas. For me and my abounding consideration for the elderly, it's a real regret I don't even have a single chair to offer you."

Lewes: "Goodness, so yer making me stand ter talk. Taking a whip ter the aged shows kids these days ern't what they used ter be."

Subaru: "Oh, that line really did sound like someone old. Don't miss a beat on the elderly appeal, huh."

Subaru smiles wryly at Lewes as she taps her perfectly straight back, making a show of her nonexistent geriatric failings. He invites her into the middle of the small room, himself with arms crossed as he leans against a wall.

Subaru: "Honestly for my mental state going on gossiping with a cute girl's really not that bad." Lewes: "Flirt. I got jerst a smidge ter many years on me ter be called a girl."

Subaru: "If we're talking ages, my main heroine's pretty well my senior too. Though, well, that her apparent age and mental age don't balance to that came rather into illumination recently."

Real age: ≈100 years. Apparent age: 18 years. Mental age: 14 years.

The complexity of Emilia's genre is superb, and never lets Subaru get bored. Just when she seemed a loligranny, truth is surprise, she's a grannyloli.

Finally Subaru understands why, relative to her appearance, she's immature, weak, idealistic, and says rather grannyish things.

Subaru: "And for Emilia's sake as well, I wanna do the things I can. —And so I'll be hearing plenty of things from you, Lewes Sigma-san."

Lewes: "Sig... what?"

Subaru: "Sorry, just sprung out. Calling all four of you Lewes-san's confusing

so for expediency came up with them for myself. Alpha, Beta, Sigma, Theta.”

Lewes: “...”

Lewes puts her hand to her mouth in thought, Subaru fumbling on the very first conversational step. Furrowing his brows at her reaction, which is too lacking to be displeasure, Subaru raises his finger at Sigma before she can bring it up again.

Subaru: “Anyway, it's a real help that you agreed to this talk. Going from your attitude, Sig... Today Lewes-san, you definitely must've had the option not to respond.”

Lewes: “If yer having trouble, I don't mind yer calling me Sigma. Being that we're talking about us individuals, I agree with you that differentiating us is best. Never been need ter do it until today, though.”

Subaru: “Really? Well then I'll oblige. If you want a cuter one this's kinda your chance for swapping out for one of the other three's names.”

Lewes: “—Ner, just use Sigma. Or no, do use Sigma.”

Subaru blinks at the shift of nuance in the response, but it doesn't seem Lewes has any intention to

continue further with this topic. Lewes: “Now,”

Lewes: “I'm mostly sure I already know, but... what're yer getting me ter talk about, Su-bo? What about SANCTUARY's circumstances der yer wantter know?”

Subaru: "What I want to know is basically everything I don't know, but... for the moment, it's what exactly did you see in the tomb, Sigma-san. I heard from Alpha-san two days ago that two Lewes-sans've challenged the TRIAL. You're one of those Lewes-sans, no mistake there, Sigma-san?"

Sigma: "No, no mistake there. I'm one erv the two Leweses who've gone in the tomb. But, that said, I've ernly been in once, and fer only a short time... all it wers was stepping in to bring Gar-bo outside, after he ignored the agreement and went in the tomb."

This is stuff he's already heard from Frederica. Apparently the Lewes she implored for help was Sigma.

Subaru: "All it was was stepping in... but in saying, you went inside so you saw something, right? Sigma-san, you've, um... well, you also, your past."

Sigma: "—"

Subaru: "If the tomb just absolutely hates you like Roswaal, you get rejected the moment you even think to go in. There's how Roswaal nearly exploded, and Patrasche who went in to help me was covered in wounds, too. Swooping in there unqualified requires just as much resolve as it does to challenge the TRIAL."

Sigma: "Surely there's possibility I had that resolve ter be wounded?"

Subaru: "That story would be beautiful. ...But then it stops being apparent why you are in fact opposing SANCTUARY's freedom. It doesn't make sense."

Sigma: “—”

Information she had not actually confessed—Although Leweses Sigma and Theta had both said they opposed SANCTUARY's liberation, Sigma elects for silence, unrefuting.

Silence is a deed equivalent to affirmation.

Subaru: “You had to've seen your past in the tomb. That's the impetus for why you're evading SANCTUARY's potential freedom. What on earth did you see?”

Sigma: “...”

Subaru: “If we're talking possibilities, potentially it's something from around your birth. That'd maybe be when you were produced from the crystal, or otherwise...”

Sigma: “Lewes Meyer's past, yer mean?”

Cutting Subaru to the pass, Sigma hits to the core of the topic.

Subaru's lips pull taught in silence, but despite this, he figures this possibility is likely correct.

These four Lewes personalities had been introducing themselves as Lewes Meyer ever since their birth, acting as the representative of SANCTUARY. Should they have a past meriting any regret, then it would've been from before

their births—perhaps before they became the Leweses they were now, thought Subaru.

Sigma's reaction has told him that his ideas were not necessarily misaimed.

Subaru: "If what you saw was the past of the one in the crystal, of the legitimate Lewes-san... then I basically get why you're scared. Since the why is the why she's sealed in the crystal."

Lewes: "..."

The person who sealed Lewes Meyer in crystal and arranged her as a duplicate-producing device was the WITCH OF GREED Echidna.

If Sigma had recollected on the time where the witch had sealed her, then that conceivably gave her plenty of reason to abandon the TRIAL's completion. But,

Lewes: "My stars Su-bo, just how much der yer know?" Subaru: "..."

Lewes: "The numbers erv people who know what happened ter Lewes Meyer are limited ter the utmost, even in this SANCTUARY. I highly doubt any erv them werld tell yer about it, Su-bo."

Something, hesitant to interject, rests in Sigma's expression. She keeps her gaze from Subaru, staring up instead at the ceiling and its prominent holes.

Lewes: "I dern't think Roz-bo's even, er even the other Lewes who knows the tomb've been told. With that considered, where did yer learn this from, Su-bo?"

Subaru: “—”

Subaru hesitates on how best to respond.

It's something of a basic question, but nothing simple.

A tingle races down his spine, the atmosphere palpably shifts. These were the portents of the gambling room—not a mortal sortie, but a scene which would dictate the mortal sorties coming afterwards.

The sensation's resemblant to when he implored for assistance in Crusch's mansion, before the White Whale fight.

Meaning that right now at this instant, the way this conversation falls will greatly influence SANCTUARY's future.

Subaru: “—”

With the second arrival of silence, Subaru deliberates painstakingly.

The answer Sigma seeks from Subaru will heavily dictate what comes after.

However, Subaru is not very good at supposing the inner emotions of others. In fact he is excessively ignorant of subtleties. He lacks in smarts, so it's when his brain's burning enough to shoot flames out his ears that he's about average.

The answer Subaru should voice here is— Subaru: “I learned it from Echidna. In the tomb.” Sigma: “—From, the Great Witch.”

Hearing the witch's name, Sigma's expression tenses slightly.

Subaru understood to a painful extent from his time spent in SANCTUARY that Echidna's name carries heavy significance. While Roswaal dislikes her being called the WITCH OF GREED, Subaru thinks Garfiel and the Leweses avoid the

appellation ECHIDNA.

Echidna's name is, most likely, taboo to them. One that would in both good and bad meanings end up stimulating the past.

It was a bet on how she would react to him touching the taboo, but Subaru chose his decision.

Subaru: "My qualifications've been revoked right now, but temporarily I was qualified to challenge the tomb. So I more or less know what you experience in the TRIAL. And also what Echidna's plotting, why she created SANCTUARY, and why she's producing duplicates like you, Sigma-san."

Sigma: "...It did feel like yer understood too much fer yer ter've heard this all from Roz-bo."

Subaru: "And so more or less I figure I know more about the situation than you're anticipating, Sigma-san. Kinda thinking it'd be nice if this could help you determine what information's safe to reveal to me."

Sigma: "Flirt."

Sigma smiles wryly at Subaru's rather backpedalling statement. She puts her small hand to her forehead, giving a long sigh.

That ritual was a necessary one for her decision.

Sigma: "If yer've been informed erv SANCTUARY's connection ter the Great Witch, and abort me and Lewes Meyer, it'd probably be more strange ter keep it secret from yer..."

Subaru: "Well then..."

Sigma: "Dern't rush. I understand how yer feel, Su-bo, but... it's nert that simple. —What yer said yer wanna ask me is: what did Lewes see in the TRIAL, yes?"

Subaru goes to affirm with a, "Yes," when a subtle awriness leads him to shut his mouth.

Sigma had just, purposefully, used the word LEWES instead of I. Subaru's furrowing of his brows comes coincident with Sigma's mutter of, Sigma: "Sharp one,"

Sigma: "Suppersing the question is abert 'the past I saw in the tomb', my answer werld be 'I don't know'. Because I've never taken the tomb's TRIAL. But it's no mistake that I wers the one who returned from inside the tomb."

Subaru: "...In short, this means?"

Sigma: "It's simple. Don't yer think it strange, Su-bo? There's only one chance Lewes had ter go inter the tomb ter retrieve Gar-bo. But even so, there are two Lewes Meyer duplicates who've entered it. That strange mismatch between chances and inderviduals."

Subaru: "Ah..."

Having this pointed out for him, Subaru only now recognizes that he is an incredible dunce. Indeed, on second thought, Sigma is exactly right. There are two Leweses who entered the tomb, but only one chance for them to do so—there is only one answer to eliminate this contradiction.

Subaru: "The Lewes-san who went inside, and the Lewes-san who came outside were different..."

Sigma: "That's wert it'd be. If we're saying it how yer would... the Lewes who exited wers me, Sigma. The Lewes who entered was the Lewes Theta. Theta wers the one who saw the past, and all I did wers hoist Gar-bo up and bring him outside. Fer my stance on this, too, rather than oppose SANCTUARY's freedom, process erv elimination puts me as neutral."

With her gaze on the near-dejected Subaru, she speaks:

Sigma: "—If there's something tellable from my mouth, it'd be what Gar-bo is so frantically hiding, that past he wers faced with, perhaps yer'd call it fragments erv that."

Chapter 96: Red Drawn At The Lips

Subaru: "Fragments, of the past Garfiel saw..."

Sigma: "Truly, it ern't more than fragments. It's me who ran, carting him outter the tomb as he muttered deliriously, sobbing. I know what the basic story is."

Swallowing his breath, Subaru faces Sigma.

Garfiel's past—not the information he'd been expecting to get from this talk with Sigma, but still a topic Subaru eventually needed to suss out.

The chronological order is wonky, but he's got no complaints about gaining new intelligence.

Subaru: "Could you tell me about it? What did the guy... did Garfiel see, and why'd that make him give up on freeing SANCTUARY? Make him oppose the residents leaving so much?"

Sigma: "—What saw wers his mother's goodbye." Subaru: "A, goodbye."

Something feels to gouge Subaru's chest.

A goodbye with his mother—not a statement unrelated to Subaru, when it came to the TRIAL. But unlike Subaru, who can look back on it happily, Garfiel's experience lacks any of that. That's why he's so insanely bound to SANCTUARY.

Sigma: "Su-bo, do yer know about his mother?"

Subaru: "...Sort of, I got a quick version of things from Frederica. Their mother was a normal human, there were some half-bloods and, um... well, stuff

happened, and they were born. Then she left them in SANCTUARY, and..."

Sigma: "Cruelly, by herself, she left the place and wers happy... ers about where it'd go."

As she supplements the parts that Subaru has trouble voicing, a fleeting smile rises on Sigma's face. Sigma's statement is exactly what Frederica had told him about their mother. Alongside saying that their mother's turbulent life was likely the providence of her proportionally poor luck.

Frederica and Garfiel both use their parents' surnames, with Frederica adopting her father's name of Baumann. Garfiel apparently uses their mother's Tinzel.

Subaru: "But then, going from what Frederica said, his goodbye with their mother was back when he was still little... you can say he was shown memories from back then, but just how vivid could they be?"

Sigma: "Thisers a TRIAL arranged by Echidna, who holds the Book of Wisdom, yer? I'm sure that, rather than anything so undependable as unclear memories, it crafts the world off the memories which're closer ter the onset. ...A past diverging not the slightest from what his young self saw should'der unfolded."

Subaru: "..."

That was a weak basis for attempted argument, rethinks Subaru.

Echidna had relied on Subaru's memories and magnificently reconstructed townscapes and school buildings from the old world, impossible to replicate in this universe.

If contemplating the idea of 'drawing from the deepest reaches of the challenger's memory', then the concept would be personified by none other than Subaru.

Subaru: "Got it. Agree with that. But, the problem is... how did Garfiel take enough damage, in seeing his goodbye with his mother again, that he broke down crying?"

Sigma: "..."

Subaru: "Dunno how this'll sound, but that goodbye happened when he was little, and he must've spent way more time without his mother than with her. This idea where he's stuck in a rut over something that's come and gone seriously doesn't feel like it fits his charact—"

Sigma: "Do yer think a memory erv being abandoned by yer mother ends with only a shallow wound, Su-bo?"

Sigma cuts into Subaru's statement, her words equipped with knifepoint keenness.

Feeling that his neck has just been sliced with a blade of words, Subaru unwittingly falls silent. Sigma lowers her grieving eyes.

Sigma: "Although, it wersn't that me and his sister Frederica were ignorant ter how large the thorns stabbed inter the boy's heart were. Gar-bo himself might notter've been aware erv it. But experiencing the TRIAL made that wound come ter fore. ...I think his current exorbitant conservatism ers because erv that."

Subaru: "...Well then, what exactly? It's not really that he's resisting

SANCTUARY's freedom because of the outside world or whatever, it's because of... his negative feelings toward his mother, who abandoned him and chose the outside?"

Sigma: "He must hate it, the outside. The outside that stole his mother, and let him be deserted. Even should he've tried ter follow her, the barrier blocks us, and we can't go with him. It's unbearable and mutually exclusive, fer a boy who cared both fer his mother and fer SANCTUARY's people."

Subaru: "Maybe he hates his mother? Who left him behind, went to the outside, his mother."

For a Subaru who has never been disowned by a blood relative, this is a pain he cannot understand. No matter how shameful Subaru was, or how he presented that was worthless, his parents never ever thought of abandoning or giving up on him.

Although saved by that felicity, right now, it was tormenting him. Sigma: "Who could really say..."

Sigma avoids making any immediate assertions.

She putters her gaze about, searching in uncertainty for the words, then giving a small sigh.

Sigma: "I've never been able ter inquire him what he truly, sincerely thinks erv his mother. I wers a coward, yer see. It feels like hearing it would bring back memories of back then... of him in the tomb, cantankerous, so I've never been capable erv asking him."

Subaru: "Sigma-san..."

Sigma: "But still, even though he knows his past, he introduces himself as Garfiel Tinzel. He introduces himself with his mother's surname attached ter his fore. My thinking is that surely, he's doing it so not ter forget."

Subaru: "So not to forget..."

Nodding as Subaru speaks, Sigma gazes over this shoddy shack—this failure of a shack which Garfiel put great effort into making—her eyes affectionate.

Sigma: "So not ter forget the emotion, that seeing his past gave him. — Whether that was fury, er grief, even now I'm still unsure."

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Otto: "You look terrible, Natsuki-san. Do you realise that?"

Says Otto out the gate with a wry smile, upon reconvening with Subaru in the middle of the village. Subaru shrugs as he gazes at Otto.

Subaru: "Well what about you, you sure managed to get filthy in just half a day of not seeing you. Going traipsing around in forests at your age, how about growing up a little?"

Otto: "Not that anybody would come to look as though they've been frolicking in mud because they wanted to, but sure!"

Subaru: "Stop shouting, it's rattling my sleep-deprived brain. And speaking of

sleep deprivation, you've got some pretty crazy dark circles going too. Using your precious sleeping hours to go mud-frolicking... man, were you hit with a compulsion to finish up in this limited timespan everything you were ruing about?"

Otto: "Could you please stop with this plotline which sounds like a once-popular mass-consumed microfiction!?"

Going from Otto's yelling, apparently there was a time in this world where some patient stricken with incurable disease spun tales about his scant few remaining days, composed it into some kind of performance or media, and it caught on. Subaru's useless knowledge compounds.

Seems like it'd pay to import some stories over from the previous world, once everything's cleaned up, thinks Subaru.

Subaru: "Anyway,"

Subaru: "Calling the joking around as over about here... how're things actually looking?"

Otto: "I can't deny that there were some efforts because of your absence... but, I myself would still think it safe to call it a success. You're welcome to praise me."

Subaru: "You amazing guy, you're my only hope, super duper you can do it."

Otto: "Some overwhelmingly blank encouragements, those! I could feel the air going leaden!"

Otto swings his arms from up to down, Subaru watching over the overreaction, his gratitude for Otto's assistance secretly infinite. But since saying so would be embarrassing, Subaru figures to never ever mention it and take it to his grave.

Subaru: "Anyway, great to hear your preparations're chugging ahead. How're things progressing for the other one, by the way? Looking usable?"

Otto: "That one is... there's tricky parts for that one, with the short time limit. There simply isn't enough time. If I cut into my sleeping hours I might be able to make it on the day after tomorrow... would perhaps be it."

Subaru: "You're cutting down your sleeping hours for me? You're so hardworking I'm speechless." Otto: "Nnghaah! A can of worms!"

Otto clutches his head, lamenting his misspeech. But, even had Subaru not insisted it on him, he probably would've chosen to sacrifice his sleeping hours to make up the missing time by his own judgement.

Subaru, as a FRIEND, had faith in that abounding sincerity of his.

Unaware of Subaru's gratitude, which shows not an inch on his face or in his attitude, Otto dispels his anguished expression before turning back to Subaru.

Otto: "Now,"

Otto: "Has the stage been set on your end, Natsuki-san? In all honesty, considering the trouble with Emilia-sama, I'd been questioning for a moment whether to pack my bags and commit a runner."

Subaru: "I'm confident I'm steadily gathering up the missing pieces. Still have

that disconcerting thing where the finished image's indefinite though."

Otto: "A-are we going to be all right. There isn't any time left..."

Subaru: "If I'm not done with the puzzle before we hit time, we'll compensate for the missing pieces with love and courage and friendship. Going off the stories I know, that'll manage something."

Otto: "Well alright so, Natsuki-san. While I did say 'with disregard to chances of success', to bet in a proper contest on the side with zero probability of winning is, rather than simple idiocy, something closer to suicide-seeking, and..."

Otto goes on muttering, but Subaru ignores him and starts walking. Otto follows to match Subaru's step, reluctantly.

Feeling no chastisement for fanning Otto's anxiety, Subaru continues heading for the building where Roswaal is waiting—it's not essential, but he's bringing along the story of how matters have proceeded thus far.

His conversation with Lewes Sigma now over, Subaru has come to learn some fragments of Garfiel's past.

Sigma didn't possess any further information, but she did inform that her lack of proactiveness about freeing SANCTUARY was because of Garfiel's bearing as he rejected his past, and because Theta's attitude as she pushed the tomb situation onto Sigma was just that unstable.

Going off the duplicates' rotation, Theta is scheduled to show up tomorrow.

What did Theta see during the TRIAL? Probably it was a memory from Lewes Meyer's interactions with Echidna, but what did she see that made her oppose

leaving SANCTUARY?

Once that is illuminated, Subaru should then get opportunity to unravel Theta's stubborn heart. If that's possible, then it should erase the presence which is suggesting things to Garfiel, and give Subaru chance to speak with violence-avowed Garfiel.

Garfiel strongly presents his roughness and recklessness, but his nature is not so simplistic that he unquestionably approves all unruly behaviour. Or at least, such was Subaru's impression.

If he truly was simplistic, and judged it okay to solve all problems violently with his own strength, then all he had to do was remove every single thing which could possibly threaten SANCTUARY.

Unless you're Emilia with Puck or omnipotent Roswaal, there was surely nobody quantifiable as Garfiel's opponent in combat strength.

Garfiel is unmistakably the most powerful person in SANCTUARY right now, and should he bare his claws and fangs to attack, by that alone would he solve every single problem.

That he's not doing it is because despite his looks, his nature is one which seeks rational solutions.

Subaru: "And so we're riding off that softness of his and planning secretly behind the scenes... say that, and it makes us sound like the villains."

Otto: "I'm not adverse to these methods of utilising whatever we can of whatever's around. But, well, I agree that this isn't exactly like the protagonist of a play or fairytale."

Hearing Subaru's mutterings, Roguish Villain B tilts his shoulders as he assists with these roguish unprotagonist plans. Roguish Villain A can only think that well if B's motivated for it then good.

Either way, Garfiel's problems are essentially the finisher for lots of the driving forces behind the problems surrounding SANCTUARY. If they can succeed in persuading him, that's tantamount to cleaning up Big Problem B.

And as for Big Problem A, the TRIAL—otherwise said, Emilia:

Subaru: "I'll go see her one more time, after this."

It's already well into the evening, with nighttime lights lit all across SANCTUARY. The sun has sunken halfway down the western sky, colouring the world in sunset shades of orange and purple. Night will come soon, and provided nothing happens, swiftly arriving should be the hour for challenging the TRIAL.

But Subaru has yet to be reported of Emilia's awakening.

Even assuming she wakes up in time to make the TRIAL, considering the time she'll need to get her mind in order, the TRIAL seems like it will have to be missed for tonight.

Potentially, worst-case scenario, even the TRIAL for Subaru's Big Day, which is Tomorrow, could be in danger.

Not even Puck himself, trigger for her present mental problems, had been able to estimate how much time she would need to come to grips with the shock.

Subaru: "I know it depends on how well I support her after she wakes up,

but... being that we don't know how much damage she's taken, seriously feels I'm just letting it lie there."

Otto: "Do you think you'll be able to persuade Emilia-sama, or rather not persuade her, but do something similar? Although, I only heard about Emilia-sama's state after the fact, so it isn't as though I'm in a place to say anything."

Subaru: "For the moment what's definite is she's so muddled she can't determine who it is who's around her. I've never seen her have such a childlike row before, either. If you're asking if I can or not... the only option's to do it, is my honest answer."

Otto: "So everything is still on the tightrope, then..."

Otto sighs at Subaru's undependable answer, but nonetheless shows no signs of fleeing. His awareness that he is making Otto participate in a battle with poor chances of winning leads Subaru to feel overwhelmingly apologetic.

But that said, Otto's stance as he makes no attempt at abandoning Subaru is truly a grace for him.

Otto: "If that's the status for Emilia-sama, how is the Garfiel situation? Have you acquired any bargaining materials we could use to mollify him a slight?"

Subaru: "Pretty sure I got the trigger for the bargaining, yeah. Problem is that the preparations to get him to the negotiating table're still looking behind schedule."

Subaru's methods for interacting with Garfiel will shift depending on how the conversation goes with Theta. What will come out of tomorrow's talk with

Theta? Subaru cannot discern the initial clues for Garfiel's Route until then.

That his only possible methods for these negotiations is to unconfidently spout out his accumulated information is painful.

Say that he's walking a tightrope every single time, and yes, he is.

Subaru: “—And, we're here. I'll be getting you in on the conversation too, this time.”

Says Subaru to the Otto beside him as they arrive at the building where Roswaal is waiting. Otto scrunches his face in displeasure.

Otto: “Yes, well, understood. Unlike last time, there's no reason for me to stay outside. I'll nicely accompany you... aauhg, am I truly declaring myself as an enemy to the Margrave? Once this is all safely over, my neck's still going through the occupational wringer.”

Subaru: “Relax. If your neck's out of a job, then my neck's out of job or is rabbit food. I'm never gonna let you die alone!”

Otto: “Absolutely nothing about that is reassuring at all!” Subaru flashes Otto a thumbs up. Otto wails.

While they go on joking around outside the building's doorway, the door opens from inside, pushing out—and from the room's interior there appears a maid, her gaze cold.

Ram: “What are you chattering so loudly about, directly outside the door so late in the night? People will come to doubt the integrity of Roswaal-sama, your master. Hold yourself with more dignity.”

Subaru: “Sorry... or actually, what the heck, you're here? Emilia's alone?”

Apologizing to the disappointed Ram, Subaru points out the strangeness of her being present. Ram gives a small sigh, shrugging in affected astonishment.

Ram: “Your worries are needless, I'm returning immediately. Yourselves were to visit Roswaal-sama, and I was called here for preparations. —Truly nuisances you are, placing this burden on Emilia-sama.”

Subaru: “Spinning it back to be out faults, really? ...But Roswaal's preparations're what exactly. He's stuck in bed so it'd have to be nothing, right?”

While Subaru knows that Roswaal is actually healthy enough to get out of bed and kick Garfiel's head to pieces, Subaru fudges that by pretending that he doesn't know.

Ram closes one eye as she looks at Subaru, giving an annoyed “Enough,” before passing through the space between Subaru and Otto.

Ram: “Roswaal-sama awaits you, so do enter quickly. Take caution so as not to protract the discussion and trouble him. ...Once that's done, I'll be taking place at Emilia-sama's side instead.”

Subaru: “Busy lady. You're seriously that worried about a basically-ordinary Roswaal? Would kinda want you to prioritize Emilia right now. If she's alone when she wakes up, she'll...”

Ram: “I cannot be the one present at her side when she awakes. Do you not

understand even that?"

Ram leaves a blanching Subaru with that statement, her expression one of observing an idiot. Subaru silently watches her go when Otto jabs him in the side with his shoulder.

Otto: "If that wasn't you attempting to provoke her, that exchange would've been rather terrible." Subaru: "...Yeah I know. I was really wondering too, while I was saying it."

Otto: "If you knew, then that secures my impression of you secretly having a rather unkind side."

Sweeping Otto's elbow away, Subaru enters the building through the open door. Otto follows behind. Subaru heads for the backmost room with Otto alongside, to lightly knock on the door

Subaru: "Roswaal, it's me. Okay to come in?"

Roswaal: "Oooohoh, you're here. Dooooo come in, dooooo come in."

The clown's voice comes through the door—his tone that of his previous demeanour, surprising Subaru a little as he opens the door. Where—

Subaru: "Ah, so that's what it was."

Seeing Roswaal on the bed, Subaru gives a nod of agreement.

Finally, he understands what those PREPARATIONS Ram mentioned were.

Otto yelps beside the comprehending Subaru, his surprise peeking through in

his expression. Oh yeah actually, this is the first time Otto's seen this.

Roswaal: "Puuuuuurposefully coming to report your progress, hooooooooow laudable that is. That iiiiiiiiiiiis an aspect of yours I'm fooooooooooond of."

Roswaal speaks in his drawn-out, buffoonish voice, snickering, his clown make-up finally back on. Speaks with arms spread, in welcome of the two.

Chapter 97: Before The Dawn

Roswaal: "Do speak. Be it a long discussion or a short consolidation, why not let us see a hearty cooooooooconversation."

Roswaal closes one eye, his yellow gaze piercing through the two standing in the doorway. Subaru can tell that, entangled in the cloying gaze, Otto gulps as if drowned in devilishness. The demonic hand does reach for Subaru as well, but he had already braced himself, and with a single cough manages to maintain his position without swallowing his breath.

Subaru: "Coming to greet us in perfect makeup means you got all dressed up on us, gonna blush."

Roswaal: "Nooooooo need for it toooooooo bother you, now. Were you not the one whoooooo told me? To wear my cosmetics aaaaaaaagain."

Subaru: "Right, yeah actually I did say that."

After finalizing the contract and bet, before leaving the room, Subaru indeed had said that to Roswaal. He hadn't expected that surprise Roswaal would actually do it.

Roswaal: "These facial cosmetics, for me, are much like a preparations for battle. There was necessity to never be lax as I acted to spur events tooooooo follow the gospel. I wore the cosmetics as a means to constantly keeeeeeeeeep myself primed."

Unexpectedly hearing the background behind this, Subaru finds himself unwittingly staring at Roswaal's face.

A visage painted white, with strange, mysterious eyeliner. Red drawn at his lips, and a characteristic signature over his left eye. Apparently all of this held more significance than just in mocking his conversation partner.

Subaru: "Or actually you could just be saying things to say them."

Roswaal: "There's no harm in sincerely beeeeeeeeelieving me. Weeeeeell, I'll task the matter up to your imagination. Being that the gospel had diverged, and I had given up on the world's continuance, I had already stopped applying cosmetics... the significance of myself wearing them aaaaaaaaagain, I will aaaaaaaaaalso task to your imaginings."

Subaru grits his teeth, endeavouring to keep his expression stable.

If Roswaal's statement about the make-up being his preparations for battle was true, then it's obvious why he has it on again as he faces Subaru and Otto.

Likely, he has regained his lost will to live, and his motivation.

Meaning his ideas of ending this world and entrusting his wishes to his next self, this backwards hope identical in nature to what Subaru had harboured, has been triggered.

Roswaal: "Would it have been better for you that I remained wiiiiiiiiiiithout motivation?"

Subaru: "No, actually. Emilia-tan needs your name and your pedigree and your influence and your power for becoming Ruler. You being an empty shell's a problem. Now that your motivation's back I'm gonna be crushing it, showing

you a new hope and dragging you onto our team.”

Roswaal: “Promising words. ...If you're capable of it, doooooooo attempt it.”

Roswaal's mouth twists into a cheery smile, him keeping the expression as he looks beside Subaru. Roswaal: “Regardless,”

Roswaal: “This man beside you staring into nothing would be the Otto-kun previously introduced tooooooo me. Compared to how spirited he was before, he truly looks raaaaaaaather disconsolate.”

Subaru: “Less disconsolate, more like he's just freaking out. Next time he sees the guy he was thinking to butter up to, the guy's started wearing clown paint. Peeing yourself in surprise's natural, yeah?”

Otto: “He is truly attempting to make it so that other people have peed themselves, this man! And please stop unabashedly saying that I'd been thinking to curry favour! It's going to worsen his impression of me!”

Subaru: “Worsen his impression like goddamn whatever, the instant you started cooperating with me and opposing him you stopped having any hope of a good impression. At least try establishing yourself as a fierce opponent so that when the popularity polls happen you'll have a chance at the upper tiers.”

Otto: “I have not even a fraction of a clue of what you are talking about!!”

Causing a ruckus in his usual way, Subaru watches as some of Otto's tenseness slackens. Otto himself also recognizes that this back-and-forth was done to relax him, his expression complex. Watching how Subaru and Otto communicate this only by eye contact, Roswaal creeps his fingers over his cheek

as he gives a meaningful laugh.

Roswaal: “Communicating by your eyes alone, hooooooow great friends yooooooooo must be. Your relationship with me is supposed to have been the longer one, too. Jealous.”

Subaru: “Stop saying gross stuff. The #1 and #2 places in my heart are permanently sold out. You think I'd stand there being any gaps for you guys... and especially for this ass to slip in, you ass.”

Roswaal: “Unfortunate. But, thaaaaaaaat would mean... that Beatrice is not going toooooooo be repaid. Your thoughts on her?”

Subaru: “—”

The word exhibits unparalleled effects of conversation control on Subaru.

Subaru had not been on guard that Roswaal could say Beatrice's name here, and with Roswaal's know-it-all expression making him uncomfortable, the shock is as if being slapped across the face.

Subaru: “Beatrice is...”

Roswaal: “She is following the gospel's guidance. liiiiiiiiiin that sense, you could safely call she aaaaaaaaaaaaand I kindred. Although, considering how I am active toward the gospel's writ, and she is passive, we have our differences in how weeeeeeee face it.”

Subaru: "If you can get results just by waiting, there's no fuss, is what you mean? I mean I agree with that, but... that curse ordering her to wait is way too strong."

Roswaal: "Reason stands to that, would perhaps beeeeeeee the case here."

In accordance with the orders of her creator, Echidna, Beatrice has kept waiting in Roswaal Mansion's Forbidden Archive for the nonexistent THEY. For this girl, spirit, given no other objectives since her birth, clinging to this command with stupid sincerity is the only thing which gives her life meaning.

Beatrice is similar to Roswaal again, in the sense of stubbornness.

Her pleas to Subaru of let me die remain vivid in his memory.

As does her expression, when at the end of the happens in the mansion afterwards, she protected Subaru. And so—

Subaru: "I'm going to undo that curse. I'm dragging her out of that stinking room, and hanging her and the books and her dress all out to dry in the sun together. —Whether or not she's repaid is up to her, afterwards."

Roswaal: "—"

Roswaal narrows his eyes, his expression one of witnessing something radiant. He then gives a small sigh, directing his gaze to Otto, who has been waiting for a chance to enter the conversation.

Roswaal: "Aaaaaaaaaand? Considering that you've called for his presence here, and the talks you've been having with him through this conversation... it would be safe to consider Otto-kun aaaaaaaaaas your side's card."

Otto: "N-no, I am only a something of an executive to equalize the terms. I surely would never act with such perfidy as to dissent against your stance, Margrave..."

Subaru: "Stop chickening out when it's this late! Just say it! You don't like his clown make-up, and the second he's defeated you're painting him up in kumadori red and white!"

Otto: "I don't remember saying that, and what on earth is kumadori!!"3

Subaru flashes Otto a pointless thumbs-up. Roswaal closes one eye, in thought, as he gazes meaningfully at Otto.

Roswaal: "My impression... your presence contributed to the change in Subaru-kun's moooooooootivation. It surely must have been something embarrassing tooooooo watch."

3 It's kabuki makeup.

Subaru: "I can't exactly deny that, but... thinking about it, story-wise it is pretty weird that I recovered from a male character's help. Usually this's where the main heroine would get me back on my feet, right?"

Otto: "You're open to criticise me, but I have nothing to say about it."

Replying to Otto's defiant gaze with a wave of his hand, Subaru convinces himself that well nothing to do about it.

It was from outside sources that he borrowed the strength he needed to stand. Now was Subaru's turn to pull the main heroine up to her feet. Or, to attempt so was what his heart had decided, at least.

Subaru closes his eyes once, opens them. Perceiving that the sharpness of Subaru's gaze has changed, Roswaal corrects his posture as the atmosphere in the room shifts.

Upon the bed, Roswaal twines his fingers together as he gets the talk started: Roswaal: "Noooooooo then,"

Roswaal: "When undergoing isolation carrying the appellation of convalescence, you simply must find things toooooo do. Inevitably you get bored. That is the way of it... and so I have been keeping my ears very open."

Subaru: "Tasteless hobby there."

Roswaal: "Now, your nefarious plot is proceeding along. ...Have you managed to experience keenly how intermingled and complex the circumstances surrounding this SANCTUARY are, owing to its origins?"

Subaru: "The swarm of intermingled complex circumstances've got my head addled, yes. If you got involved here with Emilia's TRIAL, saying 'all doors barred' wouldn't be enough to describe it."

Subaru plainly accepts that the situation is an arduous one. But he's already taken the low chances into consideration here.

Subaru raises his finger, again announcing his lack of intention to give up on improving the situation.

Subaru: "The time limit for the contract, for the bet, is in three days. I'm

intending to get things moving significantly over tomorrow and the day after, but... seriously don't get in the way too much."

Roswaal: "Iiiiiiiii'm afraid that I'll have to. The realization of the gospel is my dearest wish. I had thought it somewhat unnecessary to repeatedly explain this tooooooo you."

Subaru: "Within three days I'll have Emilia beating the TRIAL, and have persuaded Garfiel. The faction fattening up shouldn't be a bad deal for you either. I'm gonna be maintaining a future much brighter than what relying on the gospel would."

Roswaal: "When you are the one saying it, most likely that future wooooooooould highly valuable, as well."

Subaru piles up the probably-useless persuasion attempts. Roswaal lowers his eyes, muttering as he imagines what Subaru's proposed future would be like.

But by the time he looks up again, his odd-coloured eyes host no indecision.

Roswaal: "It isn't assured. —That is all the reason I require to reject your proposed future. Should I abide the gospel, my desired future is guaranteed. Supposing hypothetically that the sacrifices required to attain that future are many, I regardless care not. Because there is only one thing I desire."

Subaru: "And for your one precious precious thing, you'd abandon everyone else who watches over you. What's going to happen to the people backing your current position, and to Ram?"

Roswaal: "Nooooooooow now, best you place an end to that, Subaru-kun. —

What do you think questioning my resolve wiiiiiiiiill achieve, this late? My answer remains unchanged, as do the tasks you ought to conduct."

Subaru: "—"

An anticipated outcome.

Roswaal is not paying Subaru's words any mind. Just like how Subaru rejected Roswaal's proposal and Echidna's contract, Roswaal's heart has already conceived of the OPTIMUM.

Subaru: "...Yeah, I'm never going to be you, Roswaal." Roswaal: "Really. ...That is truly a regret, Subaru-kun."

Roswaal leans back on his pillow as he slips a quiet sigh. The melancholy thing must be resultant from the hopes Roswaal held for Subaru.

The hopes of Roswaal, who would abandon even his life during his devoted and solo battle, believing that should Natsuki Subaru be barred from all potential options, he would unmistakably acquire the same mentality as Roswaal himself.

Otto: "Let us return the conversation to the central topic. Would this be acceptable, Margrave?"

Says Otto, stepping forward to break the silence of the room. Roswaal's yellow eye gazes at the grey-haired young man, his wordlessness constituting acceptance.

Otto glances back to Subaru, nodding.

Otto: "I judge that our recognition that three days from now constitutes the absolute period for this —well—for these circumstances of us manoeuvring

SANCTUARY, is mutual. Identical to how you, albeit coincident to your steering of Natsuki-san, confer us your passive supervision of our processes.”

Roswaal: “Passive supervision... I'd say I lack memory of making any such commitment.”

Otto: “However, surely I may regard my failure to have presently become burnt cinders as just such a statement, correct? Should the might considered be that of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, Foremost Magician of the Imperial Court of the Kingdom of Lughnica, fully should it be capable of transforming myself into fragments of mana within the space of an instant. Such would be the simplest method for impeding Natsuki-san's objectives, while simultaneously remaining within limitations of what will not undermine the bet.”

Roswaal: “Hum.”

Subaru holds his breath as he watches Otto speak his polite and fluent logic. This was a gambit so on fire that they hadn't even arranged for it.

Even Roswaal looks surprised, as he reads the intentions behind Otto's words.

Roswaal: “You're an intriguing one. I'm sure that I had appraised you in exactly this same manner before, but allow me to revise. —Your personage is far more intriguing than I had imagined.”

Otto: “I humble myself with your praise... actually, is it correct to consider that praise?”

Roswaal: “It was indeed a genuine complement. Ahaaaaaaa, excellent. By standing here with Subaru-kun, by risking your life, you have proven your

argument. That determination is precious, and truly tooooooo my liking. Not everybody could dooooooo what you've done."

Otto: "That... thank you."

While there is some sense of him being overwhelmed, Otto nevertheless faces Roswaal without fear. Indeed, Roswaal was fully capable of turning Otto to ash with just a flick of his finger, and Otto was under conditions where that exact thing was quite liable to happen.

If Roswaal wanted to establish his contract with Subaru, and truly gave no care to how it'd look, then all he had to do was play foul in the way Otto had said. And even if he didn't do that, Subaru had no means to protect against it if Roswaal pre-emptively burnt SANCTUARY itself to a crisp, or summoned snowfall to lure the Hare in ahead of schedule. The bet would be assured as Subaru's loss.

While Otto does not know about RETURN BY DEATH, and appears to be thinking that Subaru's survival is an essential condition of the bet, Subaru and Roswaal who are both aware of RETURN BY DEATH know that Subaru's survival is not even required in the terms. Subaru's biggest point of panic had been just after forming the contract with Roswaal, and wondering whether he would be burned to death from behind.⁴

What to call Roswaal's neglect to conduct this violence, but passive supervision?

Otto: "Regardless, we would be gracious for your promise, Margrave. That no matter what we plan or do... you will not utilize any extreme measures until three days' time, the end of the absolute period."

Roswaal: "Once again you talk larger than you are, ordering me tooooooo make promises."

Otto: "I highly doubt we can fully complete our gamble if we're simultaneously minding our backs, wondering whether you will interfere or will not. If you are confident that Natsuki-san will fail, and are wagering everything with that conviction, surely an abstinence of action would amount to no great issue?"

4 I can't tell if this paragraph happened on Tappei's end or on Subaru-narrator's.

Roswaal: "—"

The corners of Otto's mouth rise as he speaks, his talk accompanied by gestures. Roswaal's gaze sharpens.

Swallowing his breath while he watches over the negotiations, Subaru senses that Otto has made an action to greatly dictate the contest. His tone was provocative, and if Roswaal rises to it, they lose. A heavy silence falls upon the room. However,

Roswaal: "liiiiiiiii see. Subaru-kun, you're blessed wiiiiiiiiith great friends."

Subaru: "...Yeah, you're right. When I'm about to make mistakes, I got a good buddy who'll punch me out of it."

Subaru answers the grinning Roswaal, for the clown's gaze to go slightly distant.

And Subaru thinks. Probably, Roswaal had no Otto. Who, just when Subaru

was about to err, punched him back onto the correct path.

Probably, Roswaal had had nobody who would correct his stubborn, twisted ideas for him like that. Subaru: “Nothing doing then. —It's four hundred years late, but we're gonna be doing it.” Roswaal: “—”

Subaru: “Roswaal! Safe to call that attitude from before agreement, right!” Roswaal smiles wryly, tilting his head.

Roswaal: “Yes, and I will promise. I need to refine the mana for bringing snowfall in three days regardless. And I will mention, it takes quite the laborious effort even for persons aaaaaaaaaas powerful as myself tooooooooo manipulate the weather. Even when temporary, and in liiiiiimited location.”

Subaru: “So now's your mediation time, then. Just for reference's sake, it'd be a huge help if you could tell us what bad things happen when you meditate.”

Roswaal: “liiiiiii make no hobby of being charitable to my enemies tooooooooo that extent. — There is no necessity for me to do anything at all, because I know your plan wiiiiiiill not succeed.”

No concessions to be had on that, apparently.

Subaru snorts, Otto sighs with his expression exhausted.

But, they have safely managed to secure their biggest reason for coming here.

It is an essential requirement that Roswaal does not interfere on or around the Big Day of the bet. Just getting him to promise not to is a yield. That Otto's oratory was even better than they planned was huge.

Roswaal: “Incidentally, Subaru-kun.” Subaru: “—Hm?”

Roswaal: “I happened to have heard that the Great Spirit has split froooooom Emilia-sama's side.”

It's a change of topic like a punch from above, just when Subaru's thoughts had relaxed. He straightens his back.

Subaru: "Yeah."

Subaru: "A problem cropped up in Emilia and Puck's contract, and their slate's been wiped. If you're going to consider Emilia a spiritualist, then she wouldn't be qualified to be called one right now."

Roswaal: "I heard that she was in great sorrow, although... with these things liable to fracture her wounded mind piling up further at this eleventh hour, will it be alright?"

Subaru: "...Who really knows. But our only option for tonight's TRIAL is to skip. We can't tell how that's going to affect tomorrow onward until Emilia wakes up."

Even though Puck did warn Subaru about how anguished Emilia would be, the grief was so abundant that he had wanted to cover his eyes.

Cornering Emilia like that when there's only two days left means taking a challenger with poor odds in the first place, setting them on a different bet with low chances of winning, and tightening the gate.

It is only the fact that some wind blows through the hole in the supposedly-shut gate that affords Subaru his present, faint hope.

Subaru: "That said, my head does feel leaden. But, I'm wondering what would..." Roswaal: "There's something of a sliiiiiiiiiight mystery here."

Cutting in to interrupt Subaru, Roswaal flicks his raised finger left to right.

Subaru unwittingly falls silent at the gesture.

Roswaal: "Looking at you now, you definitely would appear to be taking strenuous efforts as you ruminate on how to get Emilia-sama back on her feet, but... you don't seem especially surprised about the contract between the Great Spirit and Emilia-sama beeeeeeeeing severed. What coooooooould it mean?"

Subaru: "—"

Roswaal's almost casual question prompts Subaru to hold his tongue for an instant.

Subaru's lack of apparent shock is because he already knew about it. If Puck hadn't told him about it beforehand, and given him a locus for imagining what would happen, Subaru probably would have only been capable of watching on while Emilia screamed and wailed.

That said, that's not exactly a huge difference from what actually happened.

Roswaal: "Did you... perhaps already know about this situation? About the Great Spirit leaving Emilia-sama's side. This would be leaving aside just how you caaaaaaaaame to learn it."

Subaru: "Even saying hypothetically that I did... doesn't make sense for you to be complaining at me about it. I'm putting in everything I possibly can to win the bet. No reason for that to be criticised ex..."

Roswaal: "Noooooooo, there's enough. —Those words were all I wanted to hear."

Roswaal nods, satisfied, as he raises his palm at Subaru. The attitude forces Subaru silent, and he sighs out his nose, still feeling that he is not on his best game.

Roswaal: “Reeeeeeeeegardless.... assuming the course is established for the Great Spirit to leave Emilia-sama, theeeeeen this presents something oooooooof a problem for me.”

Subaru: “...Really? Going from your plans, wouldn't this be a good turn for...”

Roswaal: “Absolutely not. While Emilia's mind snapping is appropriate kindling your heart, which cannot bear to witness the sight, Emilia-sama losing her ability as a spiritualist means that she cannot bring snowfall tooooooooo SANCTUARY. That is a raaaaaaaaaather large blow for me.”

Subaru: “Ah...”

Roswaal is talking about inconsistency with the gospel.

In three days, snow will fall in SANCTUARY to lure the Sizeable Hare. Solely for the sake of following that writ, Roswaal must cover SANCTUARY in snow.

But, that means—

Subaru: “Roswaal, I've kinda been thinking this for ages now...” Roswaal: “Hm? Whaaaaaaat is it?”

Subaru: “It's about your perfected gospel, and its failings.” Roswaal: “—”

The thin smile disappears from Roswaal's face. The air goes dry, and the feeling of goosebumps on his skin is originating from the gaze of the warlock before him.

Otto huddles his shoulders up slightly, Subaru also feeling a momentary pressure sticking against his throat. The warlock's odd-coloured eyes focus intently on Subaru.

Roswaal: "Continue, Subaru-kun. About these, failings of the gospel... thaaaaat you mentioned."

Roswaal reaches into the pillow at his back, his hand when he pulls it out now clutching a black-bound book—the gospel. Just by having this thing appear, something strange and daunting steadily weighs the atmosphere of the room down.

Subaru: "T-there's always... been something off about you said, about following the gospel's writ.

But I had so many other things weighing on me that I've been overlooking that offness until

now. ...But, after taking the time to calm down and think about you and the gospel, and probing into that strange feeling... there's something I noticed."

Roswaal: "Why don't we hear it."

Subaru: "Right now we'll leave aside how the Witch Cultist gospels... it was imperfect and this was the case for it, but it wrote unfriendly writs. What we're talking about is the definitive defect in the gospel you have."

Roswaal: "—"

At the word 'defect', Roswaal's eyebrows tremble.

That he nevertheless remains silent is maybe because he holds unending interest in what Subaru is talking about. For Roswaal, the gospel is literally the lifeline propping up his plans.

He has no reason not to listen when he hears words like 'defect' and 'failing' said in reference to it.

Taking in a small breath, his guts trembling from the pressure clogging his throat, Subaru glares, forcefully, at Roswaal.

Subaru: "Going from what you've said, your gospel has written about the events happening here in SANCTUARY, following the path until they all resolve. To you that goes down a route where I conquer the tomb in place of Emilia, who fails to beat it. As a requirement to corner her and make her fail, you bring snowfall and have the Hare attack SANCTUARY. You press the mansion with a predicament to spur my resolve, and pare away the USELESS elements of me. — Is this right?"

Roswaal: "For the most part, eeeeeeeeexactly right. Now, the defect?"

Subaru: "...You didn't know that bringing the snowfall would usher the Sizeable Hare. Your gospel hasn't written so far as to mention what bringing snow results in. The only thing it says is IT SNOWS, and because that's necessary writ you actualize it—you're the book's puppet."

Roswaal: "I am aware. Even supposing that is correct, I care not. By following the book, I can achieve my desired future. In such a case, what hesitation is there to be had in being made to dance to heartless and formless letters?"

Roswaal's eyes waver, uncertain of what Subaru will say next. But, having his theory validated this far grants his hypothesis a definite sense of reality. —

Speaking hypothetically, if this is the case, then,

Subaru: "We really are both clowns." Roswaal: "—Hm."

Roswaal narrows his eyes, the heavy atmosphere in the room steadily compounding. Perhaps this sensation Subaru felt of the temperature dropping was because the warlock's wave of quiet emotion was depriving the atmospheric mana of its hideaways.

Either way, iring Roswaal and touching on the awriness of the gospel was necessary. Both for solving a question of Subaru's—and for making Roswaal doubt his own condition and practices.

Subaru: "Let's return to the topic. Your gospel has a writ saying IT SNOWS. We'll assume that fundamentally it means for Emilia to cause the snow. Emilia can't, or otherwise won't do that, and you cause the snow in her place. Following, the gospel's writ."

Roswaal: "You are repeating yourself. Haste to the conclusion. Where is the failing, the defect in..."

Subaru: "Meaning that basically, should Emilia not cause the snow, you would not cause the snow either, if you didn't have the gospel. Snow would not fall in SANCTUARY, is also what it means."

It's a clean conclusion.

Roswaal brings the snowfall because there is a gospel writ saying to. If the gospel had not writ it, or if the gospel had not existed, then Roswaal would have no reason to enact it.

It's unclear why Emilia would make it snow in SANCTUARY—but if the gospel

is truly correct, then for some reason or another Emilia would have to cover SANCTUARY in snow. Ignoring the SOME REASON and just making it snow carries no significance at all. And that is without mentioning that this is history which would not occur absent of the gospel.

Subaru: "Prophecies that don't occur unless prophesied—what exactly is prophetic about this?" Roswaal: "—"

Subaru: "It's because they predict events, no matter how unbelievable or seemingly impossible they are, that they're prophecies. The imperfect Witch Cult gospels append the writ. So with them, I can understand the principle of building up the text to counter changes in history. But what about your gospel? This guy, crowned with that wonderful appellation of perfect."

Roswaal: "—"

Subaru: You match only to the conformity of the text of the pre-written information, for the sake of making whatever error cohere in the end, and achieve what? You ushered those results, ignoring absolutely everything else, and how can you believe that time is ticking according to the writ?

You're smart, you have to had noticed it.⁵ Roswaal: "—"

Subaru: "This is just absence of thought, Roswaal."

Declares Subaru, jabbing out his finger.

Roswaal had preserved his silence through the speech. But now the pressure encasing the room abruptly disappears, and Subaru can tell that Otto is taking quick breaths in an attempt to settle his pulse.

Roswaal closes his eyes, descending into thoughtful silence. That his red-painted lips appear to twitch slightly is likely Subaru's bias, in his desire for his

words to have influenced Roswaal.

Roswaal: "History... presumes the existence of the prophecy, of the gospel. It heeds that there is someone who will act exactly according to it, as the gospel's writ comes to proceed on, is the natural conclusion..."⁶

Subaru: "Yeah. Actually I had thought of that rebuttal. —And so I prepared my rebuttal as well."

The statement is rather faltering for Roswaal, and the words are basically nothing like him. And so they are easily destroyed in the wake of Subaru's voice.

Closing one eye, Roswaal stares at Subaru with only the yellow. It's often that Roswaal's yellow gaze and its mysterious glint pierce through Subaru, like this.

This might be the weakest gleam Subaru has ever seen of that yellow light.

Subaru: "Show me your gospel. If I can see what kind of writing's in it, I'll agree with your argument."

Roswaal: "—hk. I highly doubt I can do that. The gospel would never attempt to display its text to someone who is not recognized as its owner. I am the owner of this gospel. Even should you see it, you would not be able to understand the text, and there is even possibility for the brains of unrecognized persons to be scorched should they touch it..."

Subaru: "You're getting really talkative here, Roswaal. Is it seriously that much of an issue for you if I see that book?"

Seeing Roswaal get stuck for words, Subaru's eyes widen in surprise.

While the white cosmetics prevent the colour of Roswaal's face from showing through, Roswaal's refusal of Subaru's proposal is so intense it could even be called an overreaction.

The rapid change in Roswaal's attitude informs Subaru that his statements locked on to Roswaal's weak point far more than he had imagined.

In the gospel's text, or otherwise the writ, there is something Roswaal is hiding which he cannot let be known. Was his stubborn adherence to the prophecies also something originally spurred by that hidden something?

If not, then how could someone on the level of Roswaal have not noticed the contradiction of the gospel?

Otto: "Natsuki-san, any further would be..."

Subaru prepares to delve in deeper, judging it about time to start lambasting him, when Otto reaches out to interrupt any further reference to it.

Subaru glances back, about to reject Otto's checking of him, but seeing the seriousness in Otto's eyes as he watches Subaru back, he decides to cancel on any unruliness.

This hadn't been visible for Subaru, but Otto is seeing it clearly. That reflection in his eyes announces that right now, they have hit their favourable peak in this discussion.

Subaru is not reckless enough to overstep that, and ruin everything they have made of this conversation.

Subaru: "—Roswaal, three days left. Tomorrow, the day after. And, the final

day. We'll be settling everything before then. Please try thinking over what I said."

Roswaal: "Are you thinking to put me in your debt, I wonder? —You should thank Otto-kun, your friend. He ascertained a watershed which would have been unfavourable for both of us."

His expression still absent, Roswaal hides the gospel behind his back again. He then gives his last statement to Subaru and Otto as they head for the room's exit, their shoulders hunched.

Roswaal: "I will now start preparing the algorithm to manipulate the weather. To canonize the gospel's writ. —Doing so is my compass."

Subaru: "Do whatever you want. If you're gonna keep clinging to it that stubbornly then that's what you'll do."

His hand on the doorknob, Subaru turns around to catch Roswaal in his vision. The warlock's gaze and Subaru's gaze collide, directly opposite.

Subaru: "Once everything's cleaned up, I'm pouring ink all over your gospel until the whole thing's ruined and black. —And then for the first time, you'll be able to perceive what you see with your own view."

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Done with that conversation with Roswaal, difficult to determine whether it was useful or pointless, Subaru parts with Otto as he arrives at Emilia's lodgings.

Ram: “—You're here, Barusu.”

Subaru: “Yeah, I'm here. Sorry for making you deal with this for ages.”

Ram makes a bored expression upon witnessing Subaru's arrival as, inside the room, she watches over Emilia. The expressionless look is completely the regular for her—but, perhaps the slight tenseness in her face amid the darkness is just Subaru's misconception.

Subaru: “We're done talking to Roswaal. I'll watch Emilia, so you're okay to go.”

Going without touching on the topic, Subaru pulls out a chair and positions it like Ram has, in a spot where he can watch Emilia. Ram glances at Subaru, seated beside her.

Ram: “It's worrying, wondering whether you will commit anything filthy while Emilia-sama is sleeping.”

Subaru: “Rather not think your trust in me's so low you'd suspect me as doing anything inappropriate in this situation.”

Ram: “My trust would be low. You've revolted against Roswaal-sama, your master, and have taken an oppositional stance while inside this constrained SANCTUARY.”

Subaru: “...”

It's rather obvious, but apparently Ram knows about the contract between Subaru and Roswaal— knows about their bet.

This was Ram, who possesses such great loyalty that she would not hesitate to devote her everything to Roswaal, to the end of the very end. To Roswaal she is a pawn for actualizing the gospel's writ, and the only person he can use without any suspicion.

Subaru: "What do you think?" Ram: "—"

She doesn't reply. Just turns to face Subaru, waiting for him to continue. Subaru puts his emotions in order as he chooses his words.

Subaru: "I don't know how much of the gospel's text you're aware of. But if Roswaal makes things go according to that book, SANCTUARY will be a shambles. It's not clear if Garfiel or Lewes, or everyone else will safely..."

Ram: "If you are attempting to use that to persuade me, how truly shallow, Barusu."

Ram sternly interrupts Subaru's statements. Her cerise eyes reflect Subaru, the unwavering light in her gaze piercing through him.

Ram: "There is only one precious person highest in my order. That will never waver. Nothing will ever sway that position. You cannot expect for those words of yours to change my mind."

Subaru: "..."

Ram: "Besides—my end has already been fully entrusted elsewhere."

Subaru raises his head, intending to ask what that means, but Ram stands up before he can. Ram looks one last time at Emilia's face as she sleeps, before turning back toward Subaru.

Ram: "I'm charging Emilia-sama to you. I'll visit again in the morning to wait upon her." Subaru: "R-right.. got it. Um, what did you mean just..."

Ram: "Now, what could I?"

With that epitome of I'm not going to answer answers, Ram exits the room. Subaru attempts to call out to her, but coming up with no words, can do nothing but watch her leave.

She closes the door, leaving Subaru and Emilia alone in the room.

Being that Emilia is still asleep in bed, all Subaru can do here is watch over her as she sleeps.

It's been around ten hours since Subaru held a disoriented, wailing Emilia until she practically fainted out of consciousness—the only relief had been that her expression as she slept was not one tormented by nightmare.

If her past hounded and pained her even in her dreams, then she truly have nowhere for mental reprieve.

What's waiting for her once she wakes up is the reality that her bond with Puck has been severed. And how much time will she need to come to grips with that?

Subaru does not know to what extent his presence can alleviate the pain. He wanted to be her strength—unmistakably he was thinking that, but truly, to what extent?

Emilia: "...rhu,"

Subaru: "—Hm?"

Subaru's consciousness as he submerges in a sea of thought reacts to the faint call.

He looks, to find Emilia with her head softly tilted, her amethyst eyes slightly open and gazing at Subaru. —She's awake.

Subaru: "You're, up... Emilia, are you alright?" Emilia: "—Subaru."

Subaru: "Yeah, it's me. Does everything feel okay? You were sleeping the whole time... hold on, I'll come back with some water."

Emilia: "It's fine."

Subaru stands up, intending to dash outside, when Emilia's call stops him.

The surprising strength of her words astonishes Subaru, himself unwittingly sitting back down hard on the chair.

Subaru: "...Emilia?"

Emilia: "It's fine. I'm okay. ...Stay here."

Subaru lowers his voice, for Emilia to give a firm reply.

Events over the past few days have led Subaru to understand that Emilia is of low blood pressure, and is not a morning person. Emilia's mind works

exceedingly slowly when she has just woken up, and situations like this where it's been a long sleep should be no exception—but Emilia's amethyst eyes give not any sense at all of that tiredness.

Subaru: “Do you know what's happened?”

Emilia: “...Mm. I slept the whole day today. I'm already making everybody wait during normal

times, and, what am I doing... I'm sorry.”

Subaru: “No one! Is going to fault you for that. But anyway, the problem is...”

Subaru hesitates on whether to bring up the topic of Puck. He had thought this subject would be the first thing coming up once she woke up and grasped the situation. She's putting this off, and is concerned for everyone else. Not possibly, the shock was so much that she forgot the contract was broken—

Emilia: “Don't worry, Subaru.” Subaru: “e, ue?”

Emilia: “I haven't... forgotten that Puck's gone. I remember it. I'm not going to forget it and run.” Subaru: “Aren't, you?”

Emilia: “Mm...”

Emilia gives a small nod, and Subaru comes to understand that Emilia has not lapsed on the situation. But in that case, how is Emilia's expression so calm right now?

For a Subaru who knew what she had been like after learning of Puck's disappearance, seeing Emilia calm like this barely feels real.

He is having trouble swallowing these circumstances, when,

Emilia: "I'm sorry, Subaru. I showed you so many bad parts of me. ...I worried you sooo much."

Subaru: "No, it's okay for you to worry me as much as you want. I don't mind that. I don't, but... actually, it's you right now that's..."

Emilia: "—There were so many. Things to think about. They happened. In the dream."

Emilia quietly interrupts, her eyes downcast. Subaru unwittingly gulps in the face of it, his gaze fixing on her. Her long eyelashes quiver, and again Emilia sets her gaze on Subaru.

Emilia: "I'm sure I'll be okay tomorrow. I want to believe that. ...Subaru, please." Subaru: "...au, mmhm."

Emilia: "Hold my hand. Can you please say here until morning? If you do, then I'll definitely..."

Emilia's white fingertips reach timidly from under the covers.

Seeing the offered hand, Subaru immediately grips it in his. He firmly cases her slender, dainty fingers.

Subaru: "If that's all you want, no problem at all. But, Emilia..."

Emilia: "I'm sorry, Subaru. I know there must be so many things you want to talk about and ask about. But... please, wait for morning. Because then, I can do

my best." Subaru: "—"

Emilia: "Stay like this until morning—Subaru."

Subaru can say nothing further in response to Emilia's near-pleading voice.

He brings the chair closer to the bed, placing Emilia's grasped hand beside her pillow. Emilia looks at him with her eyes wavering. He nods.

Subaru: "All right. —I will, Emilia." Emilia: "Mm... thank you."

With that short exchange, Emilia's eyes again close.

Unlike her continued forfeiture of consciousness from this morning, this is self-willed sleep, for the sake of resting her wings. What words will she speak when she wakes?

The worst case scenario that Subaru envisioned has been conquered by Emilia's own power. Feeling saved by this fact, Subaru watches over Emilia's sleeping visage.

Emilia: "...I trust you."

Hearing Emilia's half-asleep mutter, Subaru slips a sigh.

—The situation will start moving again, come morning.

The big morning is pressing in, only a few hours away. And—

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Ram: "How proceeded your conversation with Barusu?"

Roswaal: "A painful tie, is perhaps whaaaaaaat to call it. It alternated in favourable and unfavourable turns for both he and I. I had already wanted to avoid taking too much action."

Inside the dark room, at closer range to each other than necessary, the master and servant converse. Roswaal holds bedside Ram close, hugging her head to his chest as he looks back on the previous conversation.

Nothing mundane would be enough to shake Subaru's will once he had hardened his resolve. While Roswaal lacked a clear, definite future outlook of him yet, he had perceived the iron will at his core. Otto's presence, too, had been a serious blow for Roswaal. Otto, who had grasped the situation objectively and reigned Subaru in at an effective moment had, in both the sense of keeping the conversation from collapsing, and in the sense of ensuring neither Subaru nor Roswaal went too far, firmly fulfilled his role as a balancer.

Had Otto not been present, potentially, Roswaal could have practised his eloquence and twisted Subaru's thinking.

Roswaal: "He looked like a spectator, never to take the stage... but he was suuuuuurprisingly shrewd aaaaaaaaaand capable. Subaru-kun has a good friend."

Ram: "...If he is interfering, would you like me to do something about it?"

Roswaal: "Let's not. If I was to make that decision, I ought to have made it during that conversation. The moment that I neglected to do so, that option lost its significance. More importantly... about my request?"

Closing one eye, Roswaal looks down at Ram with the yellow. In her master's

arms and embrace, Ram shakes her head, looking up from his chest.

Ram: "Without problems. I have ferried it exactly as you desired, Roswaal-sama." Roswaal: "I see. I had been hoping for the timing to align. ...Now, just what will happen?" Roswaal responds to Ram's affirmation with a satisfied nod, stroking her head with his free hand.

Ram accepts it, her expression intoxicated and spellbound.

For an instant, Roswaal's eyes as he casts his gaze on the adoring girl is commiserating.

Roswaal: "Don't think badly of me, Subaru-kun. I did promise not to take any direct action. Did promise, but... I'd like to at least be permitted to utilize plans from my bed liiiiiiiiiike this."

Ram: "—"

Roswaal: "Now, I wonder what will come out of this." A joyous smile creeps onto Roswaal's face.

Roswaal: "When he learns that that virtue-loving girl had heard that conversation and all its underhanded plotting... just what in the world will Subaru-kun's expression beeeeeeeeeee?"

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—The room was dark.

With the lights out, the room interior descends into darkness. The footsteps of twilight and dreams abound in this space, and would until dawn visited

through the window.

The closed door severed this room from the outside world. Silence overwhelmed this chamber. There amid the darkness, in the centre of the room stood a bed, where there lay a girl with her eyes shut.

A silence mute of even sleeper's breathing—broken now by sound.

Being,

Girl: "...Liar."

A weak, hazy whisper.

Voiced by the girl in the bed, resentment recited in faintest verse. Girl: "Subaru, you liar."

Again, the murmur repeats.

Clenching her empty hand and left alone in the room, Emilia denounces the lies of the absent boy.

—The morning of the big day presses in, with only a handful of hours remaining.